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Edited by Regan Howell



**NEMETON**

A Fables Anthology

Edited by Megan Powell



These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, entities, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

NEMETON: A FABLES ANTHOLOGY

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### *An Introduction*

*Megan Powell*

*In the summer of 1998, my then-fiancé Larry had a neat idea: why not start a web-based magazine?*

*At the time, Larry was a freelance geek with his own company, New World Order Productions. Creating a free zine seemed like an interesting public-service project. Originally, Fables ([www.fables.org](http://www.fables.org)) was intended to be educational as well as entertaining, aimed at a younger audience, with a heavy emphasis on traditional folktales. (When originally posted, a warning about violence accompanied “Fa Mu Lan.” Now, it seems prudent to simply indicate that some stories are not appropriate for all audiences, and leave it at that.) Larry and I contributed, and drafted several friends of a literary bent. (In the Archives, there is a notable educational overlap among early contributors.)*

*We had no idea how to run a magazine. Larry's design skills are very good (the current site is substantially unchanged from the original launch) which meant that the zine was functional and (in our humble opinion) pleasing to the eye. We made a couple big mistakes with the original Fables: we weren't familiar enough with online fiction zines before starting, and we aimed for a monthly publication schedule. Since lack of familiarity with the market lead to a lack of visibility (to readers and writers), our traffic was unimpressive and the content was stretched thin. In the spring of 1999 (already stressful because of wedding plans) New World Order Productions was pronounced dead and, for the moment, so was Fables.*

*Resigned to the fact that freelance geeking wasn't something to try in a for-profit capacity, Larry nonetheless wanted to continue some of the basic ideas behind NWOP (mainly providing low-cost services to businesses, organizations and individuals who wouldn't necessarily be able to afford them otherwise: hence the problem with a for-profit business plan). In the summer of 1999 he and I incorporated the Meredith Miller Memorial Internet Project, Inc. as a nonprofit.*

*Fables was revived, and I took over as editor. (Well, "took over" is perhaps the wrong phrase: because of the nature of the first incarnation of the zine, there wasn't much of an editorial role. One of our friends would offer a story, we'd say "Great!" and start in on the HTML.) This time, we were more knowledgeable about online markets, so had a better idea about pay rates, reciprocal links and how to write guidelines. A quarterly format made sense: I was hoping for more submissions, but was somewhat gun-shy after our previous problems with volume. I decided I'd much rather put out four good, fat issues than try to scrape something together every month.*

*October 10, 1999 was a wonderful day. Stephen Crane Davidson—someone I didn't know—submitted the short story "The Dance." (And asked if I'd be interested in reviewing his first novel, spurning me to create the Commentary section I'd been vaguely contemplating.) Three days later, there was a*

*query from G. W. Thomas. It wasn't quite an avalanche, but over the next two months it became clear that I wasn't going to have to beg my friends for stories, or reprint any of my own: complete strangers were submitting their work. By the spring of 2000, I was swamped—happy, but swamped—and instituted reading periods. (So now I'm only happily swamped for two months out of the year.)*

*I'm very pleased with the way the zine has evolved. In addition to the Great Hall (original fiction) and Crown & Thistle Inn (traditional folktales) there is now a Commentary section (nonfiction—book reviews, at this point), Art Gallery, Discussion Forum and Poetry section. The poetry is edited by the very capable Lloyd Michael Lohr, who also deserves a nod for supplying the title of this anthology. I asked for input from several people, in search of a word that sounded interesting and was at least vaguely appropriate. "Nemeton" is a Celtic word meaning "sacred site."*

*This anthology would have come about eventually, but Dan Olivas got me thinking about it when he asked whether one was planned. Well, no, nothing was specifically planned, but it took me about thirty seconds to go from seriously considering the possibility to wondering about the release date and format. By the spring of 2000, I was seriously considering questions of production: should the anthology be an e-book from M3iP, should it be shopped to other e-book publishers, or should I try to find a print outlet?*

*At around the same time, I was making some personal realizations about my career path and my hobbies. To sum up: the day job was out, the search for an M.Arch program was out, and publishing was in. In May, I filed the paperwork creating Silver Lake Publishing. It's too early to tell how successful it will be as a business endeavor, but it's certainly fun.*

*In addition to the general call for submissions on the Silver Lake Publishing website, I invited Fables authors (from the 1998 issues through Autumn 2000) to contribute a previously unpublished story to this anthology. I'll let the*

*stories speak for themselves, though I will say that I find Nemeton nicely eclectic.*

*Electronic publishing is here to stay. I'm very proud of what we've been able to do with Fables, and if we'd been limited to a more traditional format, I doubt the magazine would ever have gotten off the ground, let alone reached as many people as it has so far. But dead-tree books aren't going anywhere, either. I'm very pleased to be able to offer these stories in both formats, to reach the widest possible audience (including those people who have not been inclined or able to read the zine online). So whether you're reading this on the computer screen or on paper, whether you're familiar with Fables or have never heard of the zine before now, I hope you enjoy.*

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## The Small Hours

Jason Brannon

It was a little past three in the morning. Normally, Jantzen wasn't even conscious at that hour. In most cases he was either sleeping off the drunkenness on the studio's couch or he was sleeping it off in a cheap hotel room with whoever he had been able to pick up at The Zodiac. The only reason he had broken from routine tonight was because there were some maintenance and repair jobs at the radio station that needed attending to and fewer people listened in the middle of the night. Which meant that in case something went wrong and the station went off the air, no one besides Scary Larry, the late-night DJ, would know the difference.

The maintenance work had been routine, and Jantzen was done with the majority of the tasks in a couple of hours. Normally he would have been anxious to finish his work and hit The Zodiac Club while a few people were still sober and ready for a good time. But things had changed a lot lately. He was beginning to realize that he wanted more out of life than hangovers, cocaine highs, and cheap women. And yet he wasn't sure if there was anything he could do to change his life besides putting the gun barrel in his mouth and pulling the trigger.

"You going to The Zodiac tonight?" Scary Larry asked him as he was grabbing his coat.

"Doubtful," Jantzen replied morosely, realizing just how predictable his life had become.

"Jeez, Jantzen, it's not that bad a place," Larry protested.

"I'm not going back," Jantzen said forcefully, although he wasn't really sure of anything anymore. "Understand?"

Larry decided not to belabor the point any further and shrugged his shoulders in confusion. Jantzen snarled at him

angrily and stormed out of the office, doubly determined now to change his life since other people were starting to notice. Not really sure what he wanted to do or where he wanted to go at such a late hour, Jantzen decided to get in his jeep and drive along the coast, hoping that the soothing hush of the waves might ease his mind. As he approached the familiar section of town that eventually led to The Zodiac and the life he was so quickly trying to break free of, he nearly slipped back into his old habits like a worn-out suit, turning on Wilshire when he should have kept going straight. He had been down this road enough times to know what lay at the end, and he didn't want to go there on this particular night. So he made himself drive right past the street that would take him to the bar, to the flashing lights, to the easy women that would give him whatever he wanted if only he could pay for the liquor. And somehow, he felt better for it.

Letting the jeep carry him where it wanted to in the dark night, Jantzen turned on the radio, purposefully tuning it to a station other WHVY, the one he worked for. In his present frame of mind, Jantzen didn't want anything to remind him of the way he lived, the way his life had turned out. He just wanted a little noise to tear away the silence and boredom and monotony that was blanketing him like a chrysalis. As he had expected there were a couple of nasally-voiced DJs who sounded like they were stuck in puberty. There was also the obligatory voice that was so deep it shook the rearview mirror when the volume was turned up loudly enough. But what he hadn't expected was the breathless alto of Alexis, the host of a late night talk show called The Small Hours.

"Hello out there," she whispered, sending a chill up Jantzen's arms. "These are The Small Hours, and it's my job to make sure that you don't spend them alone. I've got the answers to all of your problems tonight. All you've got to do is listen. Sounds easy enough, doesn't it?"

Jantzen nodded his head eagerly, wondering all the while why he had never heard of Alexis or The Small Hours before. In his mind he could instantly picture the sort of looks that went with the smooth, tempting voice which seemed as thick and warm as molasses oozing out of his Bose speakers. And

yet, it was the voice, not the fantasy that enticed him the most. Maybe old habits didn't die so hard after all.

"Wouldn't it be nice not to worry about anything anymore?" Alexis' voice lulled like a gentle ocean current. "To break free of the routine you've lived for so long? To escape the mundane life you've been stuck with?"

It sounded like a fantasy to Jantzen, but one that was worth hoping for. He was forty-five, unmarried, and the director of a radio station that nobody listened to; and quite frankly, he was dissatisfied with the way things had turned out for him. He was tired of having to go to The Zodiac every night to find a willing woman and just as tired of drowning his sorrows in booze when there was no one at home to share his problems with. He had hoped to make something more out of his life, and yet, here he was, driving in his jeep, waiting for revelation, some divine word from above that might give him some sense of direction. And yet it was Alexis, not God, who told him what he wanted to hear.

"Things don't have to be the way they are now," she whispered gently into hundreds of cars and homes across the city. "You and I have the power to change destinies."

Jantzen snatched a pen out of his shirt pocket and quickly wrote down what radio station he was listening to on the back of his hand. Whatever he did, he didn't want to forget where he had heard the first voice to ever give him hope.

"I imagine there are some of you who hate your job," she said gently.

Jantzen nodded his head, feeling a little disoriented in the suddenly cramped car but not really caring.

"Some of you haven't found the person who will make you happy for the rest of your life."

Jantzen nodded his head again and looked wistfully out the window at the waves lapping against the beach. The bottom of the ocean seemed like a peaceful enough place, and he couldn't help but wonder if anyone would miss him if he went there.

“I’m sure there are even more of you who are sick of routines that never satisfy. Booze, drugs, sex. Anything to fill the void. You’ve tried it, and it hasn’t worked.”

Jantzen nodded for the third time, thinking that it was extremely uncanny how accurate this woman was about everything. He had snorted everything but paint thinner over the years and had even considered that possibility when nothing else had worked. His liver was probably pickled given the enormous quantities of alcohol he had consumed at various bars around town. And there weren’t many women in Crowley’s Point who hadn’t shared a bed with him at one time or another. Still he felt empty, like the bottle of Johnny Walker he left sitting on the table each and every Saturday night.

But maybe, just maybe, this woman could help him. His head felt a little woozy with the thought. Still, he tried to shake it off, not wanting to miss a moment of what Alexis had to say.

“You’ve got to take chances in life,” she went on like a commencement speaker. “Do things you would have never thought of doing before. Live your life like you were someone else. Do what they would do.”

It sounded like a good idea, and he was determined to heed the advice.

Although Jantzen tried hard to convince himself otherwise, he knew exactly where he was going as he wound through the city. One way or another, he was going to find Alexis, offering up whatever dubious excuse might carry him the twenty or so miles to Ocean City. It sounded a little stupid when you said it out loud, and that’s precisely the reason Jantzen didn’t. This seemed like the only chance he had to break free of the chains that bound him to Crowley’s Point, his job, his weekly rituals; and he wasn’t about to pass it up. If nothing else, driving to Ocean City was one of the most spontaneous things he had done in quite a while, and it undoubtedly meant that he was capable of change. But he wouldn’t have ever taken the onramp that connected to the interstate if it hadn’t been for Alexis. Every word out of her mouth brought him one step closer to change, and that deserved some gratitude. At that moment, Jantzen felt like he owed his life to her.

“Everyone is dissatisfied at one point or another,” Alexis continued mystically, sounding like a cross between a motivational speaker and a shaman. “Me included. That’s what brought me to the mainland. I used to live on Rock Island, hoping that every day would be different, that something would happen to change my life. And it didn’t. At least, not until I took charge of my destiny and moved to Ocean City. I was tired of the routine, the longful waiting, the expectations that were never met. So I looked for somewhere else to go, some place where I could realize those dreams that I didn’t even know I had. Undoubtedly, that dream was radio. But how could I have known? Before I moved here, I had never even been inside a radio station before much less worked in one. But there were a few people on the island who told me that my voice was a gift, that it had the power to influence people. I suppose I must have realized this at one point or another but I had never considered it until I saw the flashing lights of the radio station late one night and thought, ‘Hmm, that place could change my life.’ I couldn’t help but think of the people I could reach through the power of the airwaves.”

Jantzen listened hopefully to Alexis’ story, pressing a little harder on the accelerator with each encouraging revelation. Not really sure how it would help his cause but wanting to try anyway, he turned on his cell phone and dialed the number that Alexis had given them at the beginning of the show. For the first five minutes, the line was busy. Jantzen must have hit redial well over a hundred times, but he was determined to get through. Finally, Alexis answered the phone.

“You’re living in The Small Hours,” she answered. “But you’re not alone.” The quiet hush of the water and Alexis’ hypnotic voice was enough to make Jantzen drowsy. But it was also enough to instantly put him at ease about everything in his life that wasn’t right. Normally Jantzen wasn’t at a loss for words, but for some reason he found that he couldn’t say anything.

“I know it’s hard to talk about these things sometimes,” she added gently. “But tell me exactly what it is you’re upset about.”

Jantzen took a deep breath, debated for a moment, and then spoke.

“I’m forty-five years old, and I’ve done nothing with my life. By now I should have gone to Paris, Rome, London, and seen all the things I’ve heard about. But I was content to stay here and dream. I should have settled down with a wife and started the family I always imagined I would have. But I always convinced myself that I wasn’t the sort of man who could ever commit to a woman that deeply. I should have pursued my interests when I went in search of a career. Instead, I settled on something that was comfortable, something I wouldn’t have to work to hard at to succeed. Eventually, all my dreams reached a plateau, and I stopped dreaming. When that happened, the routine set in, and now, I don’t feel that there is any way out. I’m a man trapped in the everyday. There are no mysteries left for me to explore, nothing new to hope for.”

“You sound very depressed,” Alexis said with what sounded like a hint of sorrow in her voice.

“I wasn’t when the night started out,” Jantzen replied. “But then when my work was done and I was confronted with the same alternatives that I’m always confronted with, I couldn’t help but feel like I had wasted my life.”

“Yes,” Alexis responded noncommittally. “And you’re looking for a way out.”

“Every day of my life.”

“You really should talk to someone,” she said sympathetically.

“No one seems to understand but you.”

“Then come and talk to me.”

Jantzen’s foot pressed heavily on the accelerator, and the jeep sped into Ocean City in a flash of headlights and a blur of chromed metal. Although he couldn’t explain it, it seemed like everything Alexis said was right on the mark where he was concerned, and he was anxious to know her thoughts on a solution. She knew his feelings, his emotions, his thoughts.

And it was a little bit scary. Still, he found that the jeep knew only one direction and that was the one which led to WXXZ.

Within a minute or so of entering the city limits, Jantzen's cell phone rang and he quickly hit the receive button, hopeful that Alexis was on the other end of the line.

“Where you at bro?” Larry said in his usual, disc jockey voice that was full of the phony excitement and personality that rarely showed up in person. “I thought you were coming back.”

“Something came up, Lar.”

“You went to The Zodiac, didn’t you?” the DJ asked, just the slightest hint of concern creeping into his voice.

“Nope. I told you I wasn’t. I’m tired of being the sort of guy that everybody can predict. I want a life, not a screenplay that can be read once and recited night after night.”

“So where you been, brother? Don’t keep me in the dark.”

“I’m headed to WXXZ,” Jantzen said quietly.

“Is this a joke?” Larry replied.

“No. Why?”

“WXXZ’s been closed for almost a year now.”

“Well, they’re on the air,” Jantzen interjected.

“If somebody’s broadcasting from that place, they’re doing it without the FCC’s permission,” Larry protested. “Actually, I’m surprised there’s anything coming out of that place. I would have thought the owners would have sold all of the radio equipment to pay for their debts.”

“Maybe they’ve re-established themselves,” Jantzen suggested hopefully.

“Then why haven’t you heard about it?”

“I didn’t know they shut down to begin with,” he protested. “They never were a direct source of competition for us. They catered to a different audience and had a different

format than we did. I never really did that much research on them and haven't had a reason to since then."

"Are you really out trying to replace me?" Larry asked coldly. Normally, Jantzen would have tried to explain himself, reassuring Larry that his job wasn't on the line. But not tonight. No matter what happened when he got to the radio station in Ocean City, Jantzen was fairly certain that he would never work at WHVY again, and thus, didn't care what Scary Larry thought. That was why he hung up on him.

He had only been to Ocean City a handful of times, but he was reasonably familiar with where the radio station was. At this time of night, there wasn't much traffic, and Jantzen gunned the motor through a couple of yellow lights, his eyes growing wide at the sight of the large billboard with the station's call letters on it.

When he pulled into the WXXZ parking lot with a squeal of tires and a gritting of teeth, he was surprised to find that it was full of cars, all vacant at this time of the night. The radio station facade, however, was neon and bright like an uncovered lamp in the darkness that has attracted automobiles instead of curious insects; and it wasn't much of a stretch to assume that everyone was inside.

"They must be having some sort of party," Jantzen said to himself, dreading those first few steps that would take him into the building. Normally, there were only a couple of people working in a radio station at this time of the night, and Jantzen had assumed that he would have some time alone to talk with Alexis when her show went off the air. Now, it seemed, he was going to have an audience, and that was something he really wasn't looking forward to.

He stepped out of the jeep calmly, the gravel crunching under his feet like brittle bones and hoped that he was doing the right thing. Immediately, he noticed that many car radios were still blaring the soft, soothing voice of Alexis; headlights peered into the darkness like weak eyes straining to see; and a few of the ones closer to the street had been left running with the keys still in the ignition. Maybe it wasn't a party after all, but for the life of him, Jantzen couldn't fathom why so many

people would have stopped to run in for a few minutes and leave. That was when he noticed the Impala at the front door.

Unlike the rest of the cars parked on that strip, the Impala's interior lamp glowed weakly in the darkness like a candle that has nearly been snuffed. Jantzen peered in curiously and saw by the dim light that the car was out of gas. He listened to the steady rumble of V6 engines in the night and wondered how long the Impala had been left running outside the radio station's front door before it ran out of fuel. Because he didn't want any of the people inside to see him and think he was prowling, Jantzen carefully crept around to each of the other cars nearest to the building and peered through the driver's side as best he could. Because WXXZ was so well lit, he didn't have any trouble seeing that every one of those automobiles had run out of gas as well.

"What is going on here?" he thought to himself. Then he heard one of the cars backfire like a shotgun blast in the darkness and realized that it sounded familiar. Searching feverishly through both pockets, Jantzen was surprised to find that he had left his keys in the jeep, and what was more, he had left it running. Strangely enough, however, he didn't care. All he was worried about at the moment was finding Alexis and giving her the keys to his broken down life. If anyone could get it jump-started, he reasoned to himself, it was definitely her.

The jeep backfired again for the second time like a cannon blast, and Jantzen nearly considered going back to shut off the engine. But then he heard Alexis, speaking softly from the open windows of the cars that were still running, and scarcely even remembered he had a jeep.

"Lives aren't static," she said in a voice that was as even and smooth as the rhythm of a hypnotist's pocket watch. "They don't have to remain set in concrete."

Strangely, her voice was like the pull of a magnet, and Jantzen forgot all about the jeep. His hand was reaching for the front door before he even realized it. Because there were so many cars outside, Jantzen had expected WXXZ to be buzzing with excitement when he went in. That's why he was surprised

to discover the place in such utter disarray. Cobwebs clung to the corners while dust bunnies scurried across the floor. Doors that led to control rooms and office hung helter skelter and askew in the frames like brittle bones that are about to rot off. Aside from the neon sign with the radio station's call letters, the hallways were dimly lit, sometimes by a single bare bulb. It hardly looked as though anyone had been inside the place in months, and yet there were dozens of cars outside. Something wasn't right, but Jantzen was so desperate to talk to someone about his problems that he didn't care. Besides, there was something enchanting about Alexis' voice that he couldn't quite put his finger on which was why he was felt like he had to do whatever it took just to hear her again.

Trying hard not to think about the empty, running cars, Jantzen headed toward the door at the end of the hallway and nearly slipped when his foot hit a streak of something slick and wet. While attempting to catch himself, one of his hands had gotten in the moisture, and he couldn't help but be reminded of the way a woman felt when fingers found their way into certain dark places. Once he made certain that he wouldn't fall again, Jantzen examined the spot on the floor a little more closely and found that the dampness was actually a trail that led all the way down the hall, ending at the door that was his destination.

He raced ahead, making sure to walk on either side of the wet slick that looked like something an overgrown snail might have made, and then he had his hand on the knob that could open up a world of possibilities. That's when he heard the wet, sticky sound on the other side of the door, like boots trudging through swampy muck, the mud sucking at the leather with each step.

The room was almost entirely dark save for the intermittently blinking lights of a control panel and a mixing board. A pane of heavily tinted glass separated the sound booth from the rest of the room which prevented Jantzen from seeing very much of Alexis. Yet, even with all the shadows and the poor visibility, Jantzen could tell immediately that he had been wrong about everything.

For starters, Alexis was not the petite woman he had imagined her to be. Her girth was a huge amorphous silhouette on the other side of the dark glass, and he couldn't help but be reminded of those steamy phone sex operators and the overweight housewives they so often turned out to be. Holding his breath, he swiftly turned around, planning to walk out of there like nothing had happened. But Alexis knew he was there.

"You're finally here," she said, her voice changing timbre a little. At this point, Jantzen felt like he had no choice but to face the woman and explain the terrible mistake he had made. But then he felt something slither up one leg of his blue jeans, and things didn't seem quite so clear-cut. Crying out, Jantzen jumped and turned to see what had him. Much to his dismay, a long, snaking tentacle was inching its way beneath the cuff of his Levis. And what was more, it felt sticky and moist like the crotch of a woman's underwear after sex. Jantzen jerked his leg away in disgust and watched the tentacle snake its way back under the door leading to the sound booth.

Knowing that it was pointless to try and run now that he had been seen, Jantzen pressed his face to the tinted glass and tried to catch a glimpse of the grotesquely fat woman that was undoubtedly waiting for him on the other side. Although it had frightened him at first, he was sure that the serpentine flagella hadn't been what it seemed. But he didn't really have any other explanation that could clear things up.

Trying hard to remain calm, he had nearly summoned his courage up enough to open the door and face the woman who could change his life. Then a new batch of calls came in, lighting up the switchboard in a flurry of red and green blips, and that was just enough to reveal what looked like moist green flesh.

"What in the world?" he said, snatching his hand away from the door.

In the half-light of the radio booth, he glimpsed the thing that had lured him here with its voice and its promises of a better life. Scary Larry had been right about this place. It had been shut down, and something had seized upon that

opportunity to get what it wanted, what it needed to stay alive. Something that hadn't found what it desired on Rock Island, a place that no one visited anymore.

The air from the control booth stank of decay and excrement, and just the faintest tinges of spice lingered on the air like the smell of something cooking. It nearly made Jantzen's stomach turn, but he managed to keep what liquor and food he'd had down for the time being. Bones picked clean by tentacles and teeth lay heaped in piles around the room, and Jantzen wondered how many men had met their fate here, thinking only of metamorphosis while the siren sang her song over the airwaves, luring breakfast, lunch, and dinner with the enchantment in her voice. But the thought was short-lived. The tentacle came back with a vengeance, and this time it brought reinforcements. The door was thrown open, and Jantzen's legs were jerked out from under him causing him to strike his head on the hard, concrete floor. Immediately, the creature was on him, all teeth and unblinking eyes and slime, bloated like a corpse that has been sitting out in the noonday sun. And then his life finally changed as he'd always hoped it would while the siren continued to sing and lure and kill.

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## Passing the Mystical Test

Nora M. Mulligan

“Of course the charm will work,” Trianna said with more confidence than she felt. “There had to be a reason why that book was kept hidden, right?” She arranged herself under the tree and smiled at Liam.

“I hope you’re right,” he replied. He kept looking right and left, nervously. “Oh, Trianna, I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I was the one who suggested that we find that secret grove that night. If I hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be in this position. You wouldn’t be in this position.”

“Sorry? Sorry for the most wonderful night of my life?” She could feel herself blushing as she remembered it. “You didn’t plan anything and neither did I. It just...happened. And I’m glad it did.”

“You won’t be so glad when they exile you and punish your family because you’re no longer a virgin,” he said gloomily.

“That’s only if they find out,” she replied. “And they won’t find us out if I can avoid the physical tests. The mystical test always impresses them. Even sourpuss Jason, with all his suspicions, goes all googly eyed when the unicorn comes.”

“He made a point of talking to me this morning,” said Liam.

“Jason?” The image chilled her. “What did he want?”

“He said he was looking forward to your test. He said he knew you were going to fail. I don’t know how he could have known. He wasn’t there.”

“He just wants everybody to fail,” Trianna said, frowning. “Nobody’s ever even been tempted to make love to him. Now he’s a bitter old man.”

“With power,” added Liam gloomily. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

“Look, the book said it’s an infallible charm for calling unicorns,” said Trianna.

“How do you know the book’s right?”

“Liam!”

“Sorry. I just can’t help worrying. I’ll go with you, if they exile you. I wouldn’t leave you alone.”

“I’m not going to be exiled. So you’re worrying about nothing. Now, will you please sit down and think pleasant thoughts?”

Liam dropped onto the grass below one of the other trees. Trianna, watching him, felt again a surge of heat through her body. She should have known better, she told herself. She really had intended to save herself for marriage, and yet, Liam was just so gorgeous, and there had been the moonlight, and the smell of honeysuckle all around them. What a night, she thought dreamily. I wouldn’t have given that up for anything. And maybe we can even get away with it.

She closed her eyes, clutched the charm in her right hand, and concentrated with all her might. After what seemed like an eternity, she heard the rustle of leaves and branches coming from the trees to the west. Now she heard a gasp, presumably from Liam. All right, she thought, exultation rising in her veins.

She opened her eyes when she heard the footsteps stop. There it was, right in front of her, maybe three arms’ lengths away. She caught her breath. What a beautiful creature, with its forest-dark eyes and its seafoam forelock and mane. The horn, spiraling golden and translucent, seemed to glow with light of its own. The charm is working, she thought, and she reached out her hand to beckon the unicorn closer.

Suddenly it snorted and rose up on its hind legs. Trianna didn’t give herself a chance to think. Before it had completed its turn, she had leaped to her feet to lunge after it. Even so,

the creature was halfway to the woods before she even started running.

“No! Come back! Come back, please!” she cried, sprinting after it. She could hear Liam somewhere behind her, but soon his sounds faded as she crashed through the woods. Was the unicorn that gleam she thought she saw up there by the clearing? Blindly, branches whipping into her face, she followed what she hoped was the unicorn.

She didn’t know where she was going. Nobody in her village ever went more than an hour’s hike into the woods. Trianna didn’t think about any of that until she crashed into the tree. Falling on her back, she saw stars for a few seconds. She’d always thought that was just an expression, but she discovered that it was plain fact. The little red stars burst in front of her eyes and then disappeared.

She waited until the ground stopped moving before she tried to get up again. Nothing seemed to be broken, but she felt bruised all over. She stood, brushed herself off and tried to get her bearings. Trianna figured she must have broken enough branches and bushes to leave a trail a yard wide. All she’d have to do was find it.

Oddly, there didn’t seem to be any trail in any direction. The trees around her stood straight and tall, and the underbrush showed no signs that any human had come through. Trianna studied the ground. There! Those were cloven hoofprints. That must be the unicorn, she decided, and she smiled as she stood up. She would follow the unicorn and find her way out at the same time.

She followed the signs of the unicorn’s passage, twisting through the trees. Once or twice she thought she caught a glimpse of its white coat somewhere in the distance, but then it would disappear again. At least she knew she was on the right track.

After some unmeasurable time, the trees began to thin, and Trianna let out a deep breath. She hadn’t realized how unnerving the woods could be. She felt lightheaded with relief

as she pushed the last branches out of her way and looked out on the meadow.

She gasped. There were ten or fifteen unicorns in the meadow. Some of them were peacefully munching on grass, some were mock fighting, some appeared to be sleeping. Staring at their unearthly beauty, Trianna forgot to breathe. She didn't dare step out fully into the meadow, in case she scared them away.

“Hey!” called a loud female voice. “What are you doing there?”

Trianna jumped. “I...I...I was lost in the woods,” she stammered.

From the other side of the meadow, a woman of about her height strode through the unicorns toward her. At the distance, Trianna could only see that it was a woman, and that she seemed ungainly for some reason. The unicorns looked up as the woman strode past, but none seemed alarmed. Two of them even got up to nuzzle her hand, but the woman, incredibly, shoved them away as if they annoyed her.

“Who are you?” asked the woman when she got close enough to Trianna that she didn't have to shout. “I've never seen you here before. You're not from Siladar, are you?”

Trianna couldn't talk. She just stood there, her mouth hanging open.

“What's the matter? Never seen a pregnant woman before?” asked the woman, dropping one hand under her swollen belly.

“You...but the unicorns...they didn't seem to mind, even though you're...you're...”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Where *are* you from? Not Siladar, obviously not. Why are you so surprised?”

“I...I've never heard of Siladar,” said Trianna, struggling to form the words. She felt as if her brain had suddenly filled with rocks. “I'm from Wood's Edge, on the other side of the woods.” She gestured vaguely behind her. She couldn't take her eyes off the woman.

Her companion frowned. “Wood’s Edge? Never heard of it. There’s nothing on the other side of the woods till the ocean. Have you gotten hit on the head or something?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” said Trianna. She hadn’t noticed the headache till this minute, and even now it seemed detached from her. “I was running after a unicorn, and I ran into a tree, back there.”

Understanding dawned on the other woman’s face. “Oh, wait a minute! Now I understand! You’re from the other side, aren’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“We get some of your kind now and then. I’m Betta,” she said, extending her hand in a friendly way. One of the unicorns had come over to investigate. It insinuated its muzzle between Betta’s arm and her side. “Oh, stop it, Elfgar! I’m trying to talk to the woman, do you mind?” she said to the unicorn.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Trianna automatically, taking Betta’s hand gingerly. “My name is Trianna. What do you mean, the other side?”

“Oh, there’s a gateway in the middle of the woods there. If you know where to look, you can walk between worlds. You must be from one of the other worlds.”

“I must be. You...you have unicorns here.”

“Don’t you have them on your side?”

The unicorn stepped daintily forward and reached for Trianna’s dark hair with its glowing horn. Trianna held still, fascinated and afraid at the same time. The unicorn lifted a few strands of Trianna’s hair with its horn and then let them drop again. It looked lovingly into her eyes.

“Yes, we do, but they’re rare, and they never come to...I mean, if I were in the place where I live, no unicorn would stay near you, because of your condition.”

Betta threw back her head and laughed. “How absurd! Imagine unicorns being so picky! Here, they’ll stay with anyone who catches their fancy. It has nothing to do with your

virginity or lack of virginity. The only thing you have to do to catch a unicorn's fancy is to give it what it likes."

"And what's that?" asked Trianna, reaching out a tentative hand to stroke the unicorn's forelock. The creature didn't flinch away from her touch but continued to watch her trustingly. Its forelock was softer than silk, as light and delicate as a wisp of cloud.

"Peppermint leaves," Betta replied. She reached into a pouch that attached to her belt. "Here, have some. Elfgar already seems to like you, but this will send him into ecstasies."

Elfgar's large eyes followed Betta's hand greedily. Trianna took the leaves and held them out to the unicorn. He stepped daintily right in front of her, and he nibbled the leaves from her hand. His muzzle felt like warm velvet. After he'd eaten the leaves, he rubbed his head against her shoulder, being careful to keep his horn away from her face.

Trianna allowed herself to run her fingers through his mane, which was as soft and wonderful as his forelock. An idea began to dawn. She turned to Betta. "Do only humans come through the gateway, or can unicorns come, too?"

"Any living thing can go through the gateway," said Betta. She reached over and fluffed up Elfgar's forelock. "Why do you want to know?"

Trianna grinned. "If you don't mind, I'd like to borrow Elfgar for a while. I won't hurt him or anything."

"You're welcome to him," said Betta, puzzled, "since he's the runt of the herd, and they're not due for their trimming yet anyway. But I have to warn you..."

"Warn me what?" Of course, thought Trianna. There had to be a catch.

"He's not the brightest unicorn in the bunch," said Betta hesitantly. "He's affectionate and all, but he isn't exactly a genius among unicorns. If you want him to do something that requires intelligence, then maybe I should set you up with a different unicorn."

Trianna threw her hands around Elfgar's neck and gave him a squeeze. "No, he's the one. He already likes me, and he'll be just perfect!"

"Perfect?" asked Betta doubtfully.

"Yes! Could you show me where that gateway thing is?"

"Sure. Just let me get my assistant to watch the herd." Betta gave a piercing whistle, which caused no reaction among the unicorns. A young girl of perhaps eight or nine years darted through the woods to where Betta and Trianna stood. "Leann," said Betta to the young girl, "stay here and watch the herd for me while I show this lady to the gateway." She turned to Trianna. "Shall we go?"

"With pleasure," said Trianna. She still had her arm lightly draped around Elfgar's neck, and he minced delicately beside her as she followed Betta.

Trianna was glad to discover that she didn't have to open the gateway by smashing into it. It was well camouflaged, the blankness surrounded by climbing ivy. If you didn't know what you looked for, you could have passed right by it and taken it for another tree.

"And I just step through here?" asked Trianna.

Betta nodded. "Easy as that."

"And Elfgar will come with me?"

Betta smiled wryly. "You still smell like peppermint, don't you? Then he'll follow you anywhere. Dim wit that he is. Bring him back after you're finished with him, all right?"

"Absolutely. And thank you! Come on, Elfgar," said Trianna. She turned decisively to walk through the gateway, and was pleased to feel the unicorn's silky mane tickling her arm as it walked beside her.

It still took her quite some time to find her way back to where Liam waited for her in the meadow. He nearly jumped when he saw Elfgar.

"Then the charm worked!" he exclaimed. "I was so worried!"

“Well, it isn’t exactly the charm,” she replied. “I’ll explain later. First, we have to do a little practicing. I’ve figured it all out.”

They spent the next two hours in the meadow, running through the plan with Elfgar. By the time they finished, Trianna believed the unicorn was probably ready to do his part. It had taken him long enough to get the idea.

On their way to the square the following morning, Trianna’s mother seemed preoccupied. “Are you sure you want to do the mystical test?” she asked when they were in sight of the square. “It’s...hard to pass, you know.”

“Mom,” said Trianna serenely, “don’t worry. It’s under control.” Of course, she added to herself, Elfgar just has to remember his cue this time.

“All right,” Jason announced in his booming voice. “Trianna Helensdaughter wishes to wed Liam Davidson. She has requested the mystical test, and it has been approved. All who wish to witness the test shall follow us to the Green Meadow.”

Trianna, wearing flowers in her hair, with a secret pouch of peppermint attached to her belt, led the way to the green meadow. She noticed how many people had joined to witness the scene. Judging by their expressions, a number of people expected her to fail, including most of Liam’s and her friends. Her mother didn’t look terrifically confident, either. Trianna wished she could just reassure her, but there wasn’t time.

She sat down under the tree, just as she’d done in all the rehearsals. She spread her skirt around her, and waited till the other people had withdrawn to the prescribed distance. “Come to me, unicorn,” she sang out in her sweetest voice. That was Elfgar’s cue.

Nothing happened. “Come to me, unicorn,” she called out, a little louder this time.

Still no result. She remembered Betta’s warning. The seconds seemed to crawl across her skin like biting insects.

She felt a drop of sweat start between her shoulder blades and run down inside her dress.

The people who waited in the circle around her began to murmur. Jason in particular smirked in an annoying fashion. She could see that he was just itching to pronounce the sentence. Not yet, though. He had to wait the prescribed time, to give the unicorn a chance. He would give her the ten minutes, not one second more.

Trianna waited until she could make her voice level, and then sang out again, “Come to me, unicorn.”

He minced out onto the grass quickly, as if he’d only just remembered what he was supposed to do. Trianna allowed herself to breathe for the first time. She heard the ooohs of the audience as a background noise. She made the little hand gesture which, Liam had assured her, couldn’t be seen from any appreciable distance by any but a unicorn’s sharp eyes. Elfgar gazed around. Then he caught sight of Trianna and his head bobbed up joyfully. He bounded to her, nearly knocking her into the tree in his enthusiasm, and dropped to his knees abruptly in front of her. She reached out to touch his mane, and after a long second or two, Elfgar remembered his cue and rubbed his head against her shoulder with every sign of affection.

“Well,” said Jason, startled and a little disappointed, “it looks as though Trianna has passed the test. That is assuredly a unicorn, a rare and beautiful beast of unmistakable purity, and it has come to her, proving that she is a virgin.”

Trianna hugged Elfgar to her, her whole body shaking with relief.

“Oh, darling!” cried Trianna’s mother, running across the grass to embrace her.

That’s when everything went wrong.

Elfgar turned his graceful head to see Trianna’s mother. He pulled himself up to his feet and turned his whole body in her direction. Then, before Trianna could react, Elfgar joyfully ran

up to Trianna's mother and rubbed his silky head against her shoulder as well, as if she were his long-lost friend.

Jason, who had turned back to the village, stopped short. "What is this?" he demanded. "Helen is most certainly not a virgin! Trianna has failed the test! The test is meaningless!" He rubbed his hands together, delighted.

Desperation came to her aid. Trianna suddenly got a brainstorm. She walked over to Elfgar and placed her arm around his neck. "No," she said in a loud, clear voice. That got everybody's attention. For a second, there was silence again. "He is truly a unicorn. And he has selected me. That is all the test requires. Whether he also finds beauty and goodness in someone else is beside the point."

"The point is," roared Jason when he'd recovered his voice, "that the unicorn has selected someone else whom we know is not a virgin, so his selecting you doesn't prove that you are a virgin!"

"He chose me!" said Trianna. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see other people in the crowd, children, people her age, people her mother's age, edging forward, closer to Elfgar, their eyes wide and hungry. "I say I've passed the test! What do you say?"

"I say she passed the test!" cried Trianna's mother, her face buried in Elfgar's mane.

"And I!" cried Liam.

"And I!" "And I!" cried a chorus of voices.

Elfgar was surrounded by people now, petting him, stroking him, cooing at him. He shivered all over, pleased to be the center of attention.

"I can marry Liam, then," said Trianna to Jason.

He glared at the unicorn. "It shouldn't do that," he growled.

"You're jealous, aren't you?" she asked quietly. "You've never had a unicorn come to you, have you?"

He turned away, still angry.

“Oh, don’t feel bad,” said Trianna. She deliberately bumped against him, and dropped her packet of peppermint into his pocket. “I’m sure there are good qualities in you that the unicorn will find. Why don’t you just go over there yourself?”

She gave him a little push in the direction of the crowd. He stumbled at first, and then caught himself. She could see his reluctance, his doubt. And then Elfgar raised his bright head and turned to look at Jason. His nostrils widened, and he leaped to his feet, bounding over to Jason. Trianna was in a position to see Jason’s expression as Elfgar rubbed his delicate muzzle over the man’s ribs. She’d never seen Jason look more human.

“What’d you do?” asked Liam in an undertone, standing beside her.

“I got us past the test,” Trianna replied.

“So much for the fine discretion of unicorns,” Liam said, smiling.

“What are you talking about? He chose me first, didn’t he?”

“Well, actually,” said Liam, with that expression turned Trianna’s knees to water, “I think *I* chose you first.”

“First, last and in between,” said Trianna, grinning mischievously at him. “And now that everybody’s convinced that I’m a virgin and there’s nothing to worry about, why don’t we head out and see if we can’t find that grove again? While everybody’s distracted?”

“Wonderful idea,” said Liam. He put his arm around her waist, and they walked away from the meadow. Nobody even noticed that they were gone.

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## **Soul Survivors**

David Bowlin

### ***Part One***

A thousand voices screamed at Daniel, a thousand tormented, lost souls begged for release, escape, death. What he was supposed to do to help these agonized souls he didn't know, so he did nothing but whimper in his sleep, and roll over. A solitary tear escaped his tightly closed eyes and trekked down his face, spilling and dissolving on his pillow.

Night slowly bled into day, and with the bright sunlight came new hope—hope that the screams of the damned would not come again that night.

But they were going to, and eight-year-old Daniel Brate knew it.

### ***Part Two***

“...don’t understand how a child can know such things.” Amazement washed over the old priest’s face and his hands had begun to shake. “I mean, he’s just a child, surely no older than ten?”

Evelyn sighed and her shoulders sagged. She already knew what was coming; she had been through all this a hundred times before.

“Yes, Father, he’s ten. And no, I’m not into Satanism, my husband’s not a member of the occult, Daniel doesn’t read books or watch movies about demons or murders or cattle mutilations. He’s just a little boy, and I’m sure it was a mistake coming here. I’m sorry, Father, to have wasted your time.”

Evelyn got up to leave, but the priest’s cold hands grabbed her wrists and pulled her back down. For such an old man, she

thought, his grip was firm and final. She started to protest, but when she looked into the careworn old eyes the words lost themselves somewhere between her brain and her mouth. He was sweating now, though the room was a chilling sixty-five degrees. Church basements were always cold, no matter what the outside thermometers read. Cold and damp.

“You’ve got to listen to me,” the priest whispered. His urgent voice, the tone of his words arrested Evelyn, and she stared at the priest anew. “Your son spoke of Accleus. My god, my Savior...*he knows the name!*”

A cold sweat broke out on Evelyn’s forehead, a sweat of dread and fear and pain. She didn’t know why this name was so shocking to the old priest, but it was clear that it meant something—and that whatever it was, that something was very bad indeed.

She swallowed hard, and although she feared to hear the answer, forced the words to come. “Father Billingsly, what is Accleus, and why didn’t any of the other thirteen doctors and priests react to this name the way you have? Is my son in danger?” The icy finger of dread slithered its way up her spine as the priest stared, awestruck, toward the heavens. Evelyn started to speak again, but the priest’s actions stopped her.

Father Billingsly made the sign of the cross across his chest, and wouldn’t speak until Evelyn did the same. With his eyes tightly shut, he whispered a prayer of strength and guidance.

Through a shaky, uneven voice, the priest finally spoke. “Daughter, your son claims to have *spoken* to Accleus. Mrs. Brate, Accleus was the last angel to be thrown out of Heaven by God Himself.”

“But surely if this is in the Bible, the other priests would have recognized the name, Father?”

The old man shivered as cold sweat ran down his spine. His blood felt like ice running through his veins, his heart like a beating drum sounding impending doom.

“Daughter. Evelyn. The name ‘Accleus’ isn’t mentioned in the Bible. It isn’t mentioned anywhere in the world except one place. Underneath the Vatican there are chambers and tunnels far older than Rome itself. Within these earthen halls there are tomes of forgotten knowledge, books and scrolls and parchment that contain records of the fall of the Heavenly Host, of the battles that raged in Heaven, of the pride and collapse of Lucifer and his host. These scrolls are long forgotten, and weren’t believed by even our most ancient forefathers. They were left out of the Bible for a reason, Daughter. They are too gruesome, too cruel to be included, or even spoken of.” Swallowing hard, the old man continued. “I have a fascination with Church history, and have read through some of them, by special arrangement of the Pope, God bless and keep him. I have had...reasons of my own to study these old scrolls.”

Again, Father Billingsly wiped the sweat off his face before continuing. “These crumbling writings speak of this Accleus, but not a single good word is to be found about him. Everything that I’ve read which mentions this name is full of sorrow, of pain and death and mystery. He was rejected by God, but not by Him alone. It is written that even Lucifer himself denounced Accleus. I cannot speak of it further! I must contact the Vatican in this matter, Daughter.”

The old man rose to leave, but Evelyn’s grip was even firmer than the priest’s had been. Hers had the fear of a mother behind it.

“Tell me, Father, I demand it!” Evelyn’s face was a mask of fear and worry and determination. “Who or what is this Accleus?”

The priest’s tired, old eyes faded from a stormy blue to a cold, fearful gray. When he spoke, his voice was trembling with fear. “Accleus, Daughter, is the angel of death, the stealer of souls.”

*By claiming that contacting the Vatican would break the priest's sacred vow of silence, Evelyn got the old man's solemn word that he would tell no one about the nightmares which plagued her son's sleep each and every night. She wasn't ready to accept all that the Father had told her, and would never allow her son to be the center of a religious study. Why should she subject her son to religious scrutiny when she herself wasn't sure if she believed in God?*

*Five years later Daniel and the priest met again.*

### ***Part Three***

*Daniel sat alone during lunch. He didn't mind, really—he was quite used to it. He had always sat alone, and after the first few years he actually preferred his solitary company to that of most of the new kids who invariably sat by him for their first few days at a new school. When they started making friends and heard the rumors about him, they would stay well clear of him, just like everyone else.*

*It was much easier not to let anyone get close than to think you've made a friend only to realize they're the same as everyone else. Everyone who thinks you're a freak.*

*While the other kids played baseball or skipped rope, Daniel sat in his customary spot under a large maple tree and read a comic. He read *From Beyond* every day, his favorite comic in the world because it always ended with the heroes dying. To Daniel, who was used to living in his own private hell in the form of horrible nightmares, dying was a part of each day.*

*As he finished his banana and looked up to toss the peeling into his brown paper lunch bag, his eyes flitted over that of an old man leaning against the school perimeter fence. He looked vaguely familiar, but the comic book was more gruesome than usual, so he bent his head back to it, ignoring the old man and soon forgetting all about him.*

*The bell sounded, and Daniel rose to leave, heading back to the school building and math class. Daniel loved math*

*class; in a strange and chaotic world, math made sense, brought order and discipline. Math was science, and in science there were no nightmares, no demons, no fear—only the cold hard facts.*

*Just as he reached the top step to the school entrance, Daniel remembered the old man standing by the fence, and so he glanced back. Standing there like a statue, the withered old priest stood with his sad eyes, stood there staring at Daniel with his drooping Fedora, wrinkled chin and all.*

*Daniel flipped him the bird and went to math class.*

## **Part Four**

*Soon after the bell sounded for school to be over for the week, Daniel emerged into the shadowy gloom of Maple Street. He walked swiftly away, heading home. No one followed him, no companion trotted along beside him. He walked alone, as he did every day. He was used to it.*

*The old priest watched Daniel leave the school, then turned and started to walk back to his car, but halted. His mind was full of pain, worry, and the unrelenting screams of the damned. With a sudden chill running up his spine, he looked back and caught a last glimpse of Daniel as he turned a corner and out of sight. Sighing heavily, just as the first drops of rain pelted down from the graying sky, he turned and slowly started walking in the direction that Daniel had gone.*

Splashing rain and sizzling lightning bolts accompanied Daniel on his half-mile walk home. Silently he cursed the rain, hated the lightning, though he couldn't have said why. Perhaps it reminded him of his friendless, solitary life: stormy, thunderous, and lonely.

As he rounded the last street corner before coming to the crosswalk in front of his house, Daniel's mind wheeled, reeled, and came to a blinding stop. There, sitting on top of a now dimly lit street light, was the most beautiful creature he had

ever seen: the golden eyes shone brighter than the sun on a hot August day; the fiery red hair was the purest essence of silk; the wings majestic in their soft whiteness. Dressed as for an ancient battle, the creature clutched a gleaming sword in its hands, hands so huge and powerful the very light of the street lamp seemed to seep into them—not on them, but actually *into* them.

Daniel's expensive leather backpack slipped from his hands and landed with a splash beside the road a split second before the car's screeching, screaming brakes jolted him back to reality.

Sprawled face down on the pavement, rain pelting his eyes and his bleeding, broken nose, Daniel strained to look up at the street light across the wet road. The creature, whatever it had been, was gone.

With a soul-wrenching cry of pain and fear and longing and hatred, Daniel slipped into the blinding darkness of a coma.

## ***Part Five***

The darkness was so complete, so utterly black that it seemed more tangible than simply an absence of light. Wherever he turned, the blackness was unbroken. Daniel stretched out his hands, and moved around in a circle, feeling for a wall, a door, another person, anything.

He felt nothing but the blackness. Yet, he knew he wasn't alone, for the screams of millions of anguished, tormented souls seared his heart and his mind.

*I'm dead, he thought. I'm really dead.*

This thought didn't bother him, however. Instead, he was filled with relief. No more nightmares, no more waiting or wondering. He was dead, and now the real nightmare had begun. Tears of relief trickled down his face, and his voice joined with the countless others screaming into the blackness.

## ***Part Six***

Daniel screamed for what seemed to him an eternity. Voices came closer, and faded away, all screaming with unfathomable pain, ultimate misery. Each voice was distinct from the others, yet that cry of anguish was the same. Only Daniel's voice wasn't filled with anguish, but with relief.

The cry of relief didn't go unnoticed amongst the tormented screams of the damned, and it was this voice of relief that caught the attention of the two men.

## ***Part Seven***

A dim glow from behind Daniel cast his shadow in front of him. Though the shadow was long, it was eerily realistic; it seemed to cringe from the light that had created it, almost as if it feared the source of it. Daniel noticed this, but wasn't alarmed by it. Rather, it intrigued him, and his screams died away.

Suddenly, the screaming of the damned withdrew and faded as if whomever was screaming was running away from the light as well.

Breaking his gaze from his cringing shadow, Daniel turned to find the source of the dim light in this ocean of blackness.

Daniel turned—and came face to face with two middle-aged men.

His shock at seeing another person in all the blackness was total. He tried to speak, but couldn't remember how. He tried to run, but his legs wouldn't work. He tried to reason, but his mind was a complete blank. He just stared, his mouth hanging open, looking from one man to the other.

The taller of the two men smiled, and for the first time in his life (death?), Daniel knew peace. His heart melted, his fears were allayed, his soul felt lighter than air. He wanted to cry, wanted to scream again, wanted to run and shout and skip. He knew peace in his tormented soul for the first time.

The other man, slightly broader of build than the smiling one, simply looked at Daniel with curiosity washed over his features. He spoke first, and his voice was soothing, yet a bit gravelly. *Like a door hinge*, Daniel thought.

“Who are you, child?” The eyes never left Daniel’s own.

Slowly, as if trying to speak for the first time, Daniel answered the deeply tanned man. “I, I’m Daniel Brate, Sir.”

The two strangers exchanged a puzzled glance, then stared at Daniel again.

“Daniel Brate? I don’t have any record of a Daniel Brate.”

*A record?* thought Daniel. *What does that mean? A record of what?*

“Nor I,” said the taller man, his eyes the very essence of peace and love. “Hmm, tell me, Daniel, how did you get here?”

This caught Daniel entirely by surprise, and he didn’t know how to answer. After a few awkward seconds, he just shrugged his shoulders and lowered his head.

“I don’t know, Sir,” he said, “but I don’t want to go back.”

The shock on the faces of the two men was complete. Nothing Daniel could have said could have surprised them more, and now it was their turn to be silent for a moment. The two men glanced at each other again, and then the one with the grating, oily voice spoke to the other in a language Daniel had never heard before. It was a silky language, full of softly soothing rhythms and musical tones. If French was the language of love, Daniel thought, then this language, whatever it was, was surely the language of the spirit.

The two men stopped talking, and looked back at Daniel. He met their stare unwaveringly, determined to show no fear.

With a heart-melting smile, the taller man started speaking in his soft voice. “Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. My name is Jesus, and this is my uh, my *friend*, Lucifer.”

Lucifer tilted his head in a ‘pleased to meet you’ fashion, and extended his hand in greeting. Daniel’s mind was racing at

full speed, but he automatically shook hands with the other man without even thinking about it. *Jesus?* he thought. *Lucifer? What the hell...*

“Now,” said Jesus, “we all know each other. To business!” His smile broadened, his white teeth sparkling with a light of their own. “You said you don’t know how you got here. Well, since this is the Between Life, your physical body *should* be dead, but I have no record of it. Strange...”

The walk home from school, the rain, the beautiful creature sitting on top of the light pole, the brake-screeching car all washed over Daniel like a tidal wave. He began to tremble, his bottom lip quivered, and before he could stop them, tears brimmed over his eyes and fell into the darkness.

Daniel told the two men about his walk home from school, about seeing the creature just before the car struck him. He talked through his tears, he told them about the nightmares he had been plagued with his whole life, about how lonely he was, and that he didn’t want to go back to that life. He would rather stay here in the midst of the screaming souls, for at least here he knew they were real.

“And, and then there’s this guy who visits my dreams a lot,” Daniel panted. “He says he’s the only one that can help me, but that I’ll have to kill myself before he can. He says his name is Accleus. I think he causes the nightmares. I think he hates me.”

The sudden surprise on the faces of Jesus and Lucifer at the mention of Accleus left the two men momentarily speechless. Lucifer fell to his knees with a dull thud, and Jesus grabbed Daniel painfully by the arms. The compassion was gone from his face, replaced by an intensity that made Daniel cringe.

“Accleus? Accleus visits your dreams?” Jesus was literally screaming in Daniel’s face, spittle flying.

Daniel let out a loud scream of fear, and immediately Jesus released him, peace and love once again showing on his face.

“I’m sorry, Daniel. I didn’t mean to frighten you. Did you say Accleus? Are you *sure* that’s the being who visits your dreams?”

A little shaken, Daniel shook his head. “Th, that’s it, Sir, I’m sure of it. That was the first word I ever learned to speak. My mother has told me that a hundred times. I’ve never seen Accleus, Sir, but he whispers to me in my dreams.”

Jesus put his head down, staring at the blackness beneath him, deep in thought. Lucifer kept staring at Daniel, unspeaking. Daniel, still nervous about the reaction this name had caused, took a step backward.

Finally, Jesus looked up. “Daniel,” he said, “we need your help.”

### ***Part Eight***

The beauty that surrounded Daniel was beyond words or imagination. The trees, the flowers! The colors themselves were beyond comprehension. A river ran through the midst of this garden, and though he couldn’t explain it, Daniel knew that the river had a life of its own. It emanated life, caressed his soul with a pure and untainted love. The river was love, was peace. He ached to bathe in it, to feel it washing over his body, cleansing him of all the pain and hurt and anger of his life.

The greenness of the grass was fantastic. It was the very essence of greenness itself, the source for all things green in the world. It was soft as cotton, smoother than silk, and he couldn’t help but run his hands through it yet again.

Never in his life had Daniel felt so utterly content, so at peace. A path made of the finest gold ran through the middle of the garden, a gold so pure it radiated a light of its own. A soft breeze tousled his hair and brought with it a thousand smells that simply overtook the brain’s ability to fathom each of them. People everywhere lounging in the garden, some bathing the lively river, others reading poetry to each other under majestic, perfectly shaped trees.

*Heaven.*

The word finally settled in Daniel's mind. "This is Heaven, Daniel," Jesus repeated. "This is where the souls of everyone should be."

"Should be? But, but...but Heaven is a myth, isn't it? A... a fairytale..." Even as he spoke, Daniel realized that no, Heaven was not a myth, because here he was, standing in it.

Chuckling, Lucifer answered. "No, not a myth, Daniel. It's real." He sighed, bent, and picked the most beautiful rose Daniel had ever seen from a lush, perfect bush. Immediately, another grew in its place.

"This is Heaven, Daniel, but not all souls make it this far. Some are trapped. They get lost on their way here; or more specifically, they're stolen." He crushed the rose in his hands, and the fragrance was enough to cause Daniel's head to spin. Anger flashed in Lucifer's eyes, and the rose vanished.

A small child ran up to Jesus, and jumped into his arms. He hugged the child fiercely, placed a kiss on top of her little head. Giggling, she jumped down and ran back through the garden. The absolute love of that simple act broke Daniel's spirit, and he felt the hot sting of tears yet again.

Sighing, Jesus looked at Daniel. "You see, when people die their souls should come here where they can enjoy eternal life, and all the beauty of Heaven. Most of them make it eventually, but some don't. Those that die prematurely are caught in Between Life. That's where you were, in the domain of Accleus. He is the stealer of souls."

"But, why can't you just bring them here, like you did me?"

"I wish we could, but there's a difference. You, Daniel, are not dead. They are."

Lucifer looked at Daniel, and explained further. "When people die, Daniel, they have to go through a time of... *cleansing*. And that's my job." A light flickered momentarily in Lucifer's eyes, and Daniel's blood ran cold.

Suddenly, Heaven vanished, and Daniel found himself in a large, overcrowded factory. People everywhere were washing filthy, disgustingly dirty clothes by hand, scrubbing grimy, nasty floors, sweating and working harder than anyone Daniel had ever seen.

Aghast at this sudden change, Daniel yelled. “What’re they all doing?”

Smiling for the first time, Lucifer responded. “Well, they’re washing and scrubbing away all the evil that they did during their lives. They can’t leave here for Heaven until they are perfectly clean. It takes a little time, but once they’ve managed to cleanse all the wrong that they did during their lives, they earn their right to get into Heaven.” Lucifer sighed, obviously pleased with himself. “Sometimes,” he said in a whisper, “it takes them *years!*”

Daniel shivered involuntarily as the thought of spending a few minutes, let alone *years*, in this...this...well, this hell. He looked up at Jesus, and was a bit surprised to see tears forming in his eyes as he watched to souls of the damned slaving away, earning their right to enter Heaven.

“Look.” Lucifer was pointing to a long staircase at the end of the room. It was guarded by two ferocious monstrosities that somewhat resembled wolves. Sharp teeth dripped with saliva, and the growls of these animals made the hair on the back of Daniel’s head stand on end.

“Wh, what’re those?” he stammered.

“That’s the Stairway to Heaven,” Jesus answered, clearing his voice of emotion. “Once the souls are cleansed, they can safely pass through the Guardians.”

“What happens if a soul tries to go up the Stairway before being cleansed?” Daniel shuddered to think of those fangs sinking into his flesh.

Lucifer laughed out loud. “I don’t know,” he said. “No one has ever been foolish enough to try.”

Jesus and Lucifer looked at Daniel, and the next moment they were all three back in Between Life. The screams of the

damned were faint, but still there, still agonized and tormented.

“But what can I do to help?” The screams of the tormented souls seemed more anguished than ever, and he ached to release them from this tormenting blackness.

Again, Jesus and Lucifer looked at one another before answering him. Finally, Lucifer spoke. His voice was low and conspiratorial.

“You have to face Accleus, Daniel. You have to face him and give yourself willingly to him.”

Shock and fear seized Daniel, and he fell backwards. Neither Jesus nor Lucifer offered to help him up.

“What!” Daniel screamed. “What! You want me to give myself to the angel of death? Are you crazy?”

Jesus spoke, but his voice was filled with an ache that Daniel couldn’t quite grasp. “It’s the only way, Daniel. It’s the only way.” He sighed, and hunched down, facing Daniel squarely. “It is Written that the only way the angel of death can be defeated is for someone that isn’t dead to offer himself to him freely.”

“What would happen to me? What would happen to all these souls then?” Daniel’s breath was coming in short, gasping wheezes.

Lucifer’s hard, cold eyes bore into Daniel’s own. “The souls trapped in this Between Life would be freed, Daniel. The souls would be freed to pay for their earthly sins, and eventually enter into Heaven’s paradise.” Lucifer’s unwavering stare went beyond Daniel, focused on something Daniel couldn’t see or even begin to understand. When he continued, his voice was low and gravelly, the raw hatred burning through as easily as a candle would burn dry paper. “And Accleus, oh...oh, that traitor Accleus would suffer... He’ll join me in Hell!”

Tears streamed down Daniel’s face, and he thought his heart would burst from fear. “But what about m-me? What would happen to me?”

“You become the new angel of death,” Jesus said without emotion.

### **Part Nine**

The rain was falling in torrents, the lightning crashing its electric fingers all around the crowd huddled around the still, bleeding body of Daniel Brate. Thunder continued to rent the air with the storm’s fury. Someone was holding a cellular phone, trying to get the emergency operator to understand through the static that an ambulance was needed, and fast.

An old man who had seen the accident was busy unloading his lunch into the filth of the rain-washed gutter. The driver of the car that struck Daniel was in hysterics, swearing to anyone who would listen that “the kid just stepped right out in front of me, I swear to god, oh *Christ*, oh god I swear he did!”

At the sound of the screeching brakes and the dull thud that followed, the priest had ran as hard as he could, somehow knowing what had happened even before he saw the broken body bleeding its life away in the slick street.

“Let me through, I’m a priest! For the soul’s sake, *let me through!*” Shoving anyone and everyone out of his way, the old minister bent close to Daniel’s body, listening for any sign of breathing. Very shallow, halting breaths escaped and entered Daniel’s shattered mouth. Without thinking, more out of habit than anything else, the priest grabbed the rosary from around his neck and made the sign of the cross on Daniel’s chest. “In the name of God, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” he whispered. After brushing the rosary with a quick kiss, he tossed it aside like a used napkin, where the pelting rain washed it down the street, out of sight.

At long last, the sound of the approaching ambulance could be heard over the fury of the storm. Suddenly, the priest knew what he had to do.

Reaching into the pocket of his overcoat, he grabbed the large bottle of sleeping pills and ripped the cap off. With a fast, whispered “forgive me, Lord,” the tired, red-eyed priest turned

the bottle up and swallowed every single pill. Just as the ambulance pulled to a stop in front of the parting crowd, the old minister fell on top of Daniel's dying body, now dying himself.

### ***Part Ten***

Daniel stared at his two ethereal companions in horror as their words began to sink into his mind. He didn't know what to say or do, wasn't even sure he could have spoken if he tried. The blackness that surrounded him seemed to grow even thicker, as if it was trying to invade his soul.

“Daniel,” Jesus said, “I realize that we’re asking a lot of you, but it’s the only way. The angel of death’s job isn’t so bad, really...” The words trailed off as Jesus realized how it must sound. His face turned a soft pink, and he averted his eyes, looking at Lucifer for support.

“Um, well, yes,” Lucifer stammered. “Um, you see, Daniel, Accleus has rather *enjoyed* his job a bit much, really. It’s, uh, it’s not suppose to be like that; he’s suppose to collect the dead, and guide them to the After Life. Instead, he steals souls that get lost on their way there, and they’re trapped here in this...this *Between Life*.” Lucifer’s hands swept around him in a large circle. The screams of the lost souls of the dead momentarily grew louder than Daniel could stand, and he fell, wrapping his hands around his head, his own screams joining and rivaling theirs. Tears poured from his eyes, and he began to pull his own hair.

“I can’t stand it, I can’t stand it! Please, please make it stop! I’ll do anything, oh god please make it stop...” Daniel’s screams faded to soft sobbing as the tormented cries of the damned receded.

“Why did you do that?” Jesus was glaring at Lucifer, his fists balled at his sides. “Don’t you realize how much this child has already been through? The decision has to be his, of his own free will!”

Lucifer had a far off, dreamy expression on his dark face. He was gently shaking with silent laughter. "You heard him, Chief," he said. "You heard him. He said he'd do it, and that makes it official." Lucifer's eyes closed, and he screamed into the darkness. "Accleus is mine! I shall have him, and he shall pay for keeping all these souls from me for so long! He shall pay!" His laughter echoed throughout the darkness, reverberating from everywhere, and nowhere.

The screams of the damned were lost in the heartless, soul-searing sound of Lucifer's laughter. Curling himself into the fetal position, Daniel began to cry once again. Not even Jesus could comfort him, or relieve his fears.

### ***Part Eleven***

As Daniel stood alone once again in the blackness of the Between Life, he promised himself that he would show no fear when Accleus appeared. He would show no fear, even though it coursed through his body faster than his blood.

He opened his mouth to speak the words Jesus had told him, and—

—and heard someone else speak them first.

*"Accleus, I command thee! Come forth, that I may devour your soul, and become the sainted angel of death! I demand you, show yourself, and bow to me!"*

The voice roared into the darkness, the power and fearlessness in it undeniable. Daniel turned to face the owner of this voice, and realized with shame and surprise that it was the old man that had been standing just beyond the school fence, the old man Daniel had saluted in the time-honored way that got your point across without having to say a word.

The old man continued to stare straight ahead, but placed his hands on Daniel's shoulders and squeezed reassuringly. Daniel started to speak, but the old priest cut him off with a tight squeeze of his shoulders, and pointed ahead of them.

A soft whimper of longing and fear escaped Daniel's lips as he looked ahead, and saw the beautiful Accleus running at

them from out of the darkness. A scream beyond anything Daniel could ever imagine escaped Accleus' throat, a scream full of a rage hitherto unknown—but a scream that contained the slightest hint of fear, as well.

As Accleus drew closer he raised his shiny, razor-sharp sword above his head, preparing to swing it hard and wide at Daniel and the priest. Daniel wanted to run, but his legs wouldn't work. He wanted to scream, but his voice was lost somewhere in his throat. All he could do was close his eyes and wait for the end.

The tip of the sword touched Daniel's throat—and suddenly the screaming from Accleus was one of tormented anguish. The sword fell at Daniel's feet with a resounding clang, and a warm wetness spread down the front of his Levi's.

The screams coming from Accleus were unearthly, horrible, tormented screams. With each scream, Daniel felt as if ice was pulsing through his veins, and finally he could stand it no more. He opened his eyes to a horror that almost drove him insane.

The old man, the priest Daniel's mother had taken him to when he was ten, was *eating* Accleus, the angel of death.

The priest ripped chunks of flesh from Accleus, and swallowed them whole. An arm slithered down his throat, whole. A shoulder was torn away and devoured. A leg was torn away, and was *savored* by the old man. Daniel knew without understanding how that the priest was enjoying the taste of the demon. Bile rose in his throat, but he managed to hold it down.

Accleus was lying on the black floor, unable to move, as the priest continued to feast on him. His screams began to take on multiple voices, as though more and more people were screaming from his mouth.

Finally, there was nothing left but the beautiful head of Accleus. The head was still alive, still screaming. Curses issued from its mouth until the priest ripped the tongue out and swallowed it whole.

At this sight, Daniel turned to vomit, and collided with Jesus and Lucifer once again. They were staring at the old priest who was holding the still moaning head of Accleus. Everyone was still for a moment, the only sound the low, terrible sounds coming from Accleus' head.

Finally, the old priest walked up to Lucifer, and held out the remaining part of Accleus, the angel of death, the stealer of souls.

With a pleasure beyond pleasure, Lucifer accepted the offering, bowed ever so slightly to the old man, and disappeared. The last, fading scream of Accleus followed him into Hell.

“My Lord,” said the old priest, bowing to Jesus.

“Rise, my son,” came the reply from Jesus. The love in his face was surpassed only by his surprise. “You know what it means to defeat Accleus. Take your position, and release the souls of the damned.”

The old man bent down and retrieved the sword that Accleus had dropped. As he held the sword above his head, wings smoother than silk sprouted from his shoulders. His eyes began to glow with a golden light of their own, and he grew...young.

To Daniel, he was even more beautiful than Accleus had been.

The new angel of death swung his sword in a circle above his head, and yelled into the blackness. *“I, Thomas Billingsly, the Angel Of Death, release you to the After Life! Go now, and be cleansed!”*

The darkness suddenly burst into bright light, and the souls of thousands and thousands of people came into view. Some were old, and some were young. Some were beautiful and others were hideous, but every one of them turned to stare in silence at their savior, the new angel of death. One by one, they smiled and then faded away, each whispering a word of thanks that came from their very souls.

When the last soul was gone, Jesus turned to Daniel and the former priest, the angel of death. “Do your job, Thomas, but do it with love.”

Down on one knee, he answered Jesus. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Daniel,” said Jesus, “it’s time for you to go home. Thank you, Daniel. Thank you...”

### ***Part Twelve***

“He’s back, we’ve got him!” The medical technician withdrew a needle from Daniel’s neck, and covered his face with an oxygen mask. “Get him loaded, we gotta get this kid to trauma now!”

Another voice spoke from Daniel’s left side. “What about the old man? We can’t just leave him here!” The voice sounded terrified, shaken.

“He’s dead, Charlie, there’s nothing we can do, now move! Help me get this kid loaded!”

Daniel was aware of being loaded into the ambulance, but soon faded into the silence of unconsciousness again.

The old priest lay dead on the street, surrounded by onlookers as rain pelted into his staring eyes.

“Well, I’ll call another ambulance, I guess,” said the man with the cellular phone. “Dunno why, though. The devil’s already got this chap...”

### ***Part Thirteen - Final Scene***

The night outside Daniel’s hospital room was dark, cold, and wet. Rain continued to drizzle from the leaden sky. The clouds momentarily broke up, and the soft, silky glow from a full moon shone down on Daniel’s brow, bathing his face in radiance and beauty. For the first time in his life, Daniel Brate slept a sweet, peaceful sleep, a sleep without either nightmares or demons.

The old man placed a small piece of paper on Daniel's chest, and walked out the door without a sound.

He stopped in front of a room two doors from Daniel's own, and motioned someone from within to join him.

A woman, looking confused and scared, walked out the door, and took the old man's hand. "Don't worry, Sarah," said the old man, "I'll show you the way..."

Later that night, a nurse came in to check on Daniel, and noticed the paper lying on his chest. She picked it up, and quietly read it.

*"When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet. Proverbs 3:24."*

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## **Jeo Defined**

Stuart Jaffe

When he woke, Jeo no longer sat in prison. An empty, metallic room glistening with cleanliness had replaced his dank, moldy cell. His head throbbed and his bones ached as he cautiously surveyed the new surroundings. The room had nothing to offer but four silver walls and a low ceiling. He could feel a steady rumble on the floor—must be close to the ship engines. Why did they dump him here? No, not dumped. Clearly placed. He had been placed in this room—carefully handled. He could tell from his clothes. The prison grays were gone, and someone had dressed him in his suit.

The suit smelled clean, felt pressed, and showed no sign of poor care. Blue with gray pinstripes, the coat wrapped around to button on the side, the pants fit tightly against his expanded waistline, and in the left pocket—a crumpled, yellow tie. They had dressed him in the same suit he had been wearing the day they locked him up, the same suit he had worn when he accidentally killed Rochar Bishop. The tie...he shut those thoughts off before any could invade him.

Standing up, Jeo stretched his body, his hands brushing the ceiling, and scratched his face. No hair. He had a full beard yesterday. Why would they shave him? And his hair had been cut, too. Why? They never cared about appearances before. Unless...Jeo became excited. Two weeks ago he had asked Warden DiPallo if he would be eligible for a short furlow. Perhaps it had come through. Perhaps this was the way they did things. Drop him off in the middle of his sleep; then one morning he would wake up back in prison. Sure. That would explain the grooming. They wanted to maintain a favorable image with the public—Fleet High Security Detention keeps its prisoners in respectable condition.

One certain method existed to test these thoughts—the door. With an arrogant swagger, Jeo stepped over to one wall and began feeling around for a door. Nothing. The next wall also offered nothing. A slight tremor developed in his hand and his stomach began to turn. On the third wall, however, his hand ran across a heat sensor and with a soft hiss, a doorway slid open. Before it had completely retracted, Jeo jumped out of the room, relief flushing through his system.

He entered a carpeted hallway with people walking in both directions, hurriedly going about their day. No one paid him any attention. He stood quietly for a moment, then remembered that no one would order him to move. A tiny grin appeared on his face as he breathed in the air. Freedom, even for a short time, was still freedom. Turning right, he headed along the hall.

A few feet down, he passed an observation port. The concept of freedom was too new, however, and it took him several steps to realize he had every right to look out that port. Freedom to move wherever and whenever he desired. Turning back, he restrained a long, triumphant laugh—freedom. Looking out, he gazed at the enormous fleet stretching out across space. *[sys op within acceptable limits]* Seven thousand ships soaring through the void, all heading for a new home. He could even see the prison, the *Stronghold*—his home for the last five years. Taking a deep breath, he stared at the incredible sight, never noticing the people walking behind him. All these years and never had he looked upon the whole fleet. It warmed his spirit, though no one could ever tell from his stoic exterior.

Hunger intruded on this warmth until he could not ignore it. He reached over to a wall console next to the viewing area. The main menu explained that he stood on the third deck of the *Jumpstart*. The name meant nothing—just another ship in the fleet. Touching the appropriate keys, the console gave him directions to the courtyard. *[heart 72 B/P 120 over 80 alpha and beta responding wi]* Jeo nervously glanced around the hallway, carefully searching for danger signs. Nothing. He had heard the voice, though. The first time, he had not been sure, but now he knew it. Maybe they were following him, testing him to see if he might screw up, but he could not see anyone

acting suspicious. Reminding himself never to react, never to let the enemy know his existence has been uncovered, Jeo stood at the wall console another minute. With a loud grumble, his stomach protested, and he set off for the courtyard, casually looking behind when opportunity afforded itself. No one stood out.

Twelve restaurants set in a half circle made up the courtyard, low metal beams blocking some of the names. Jeo walked to the first available seat and looked at the menu display built into the counter. “Old Philly” the top of the menu read. That suited him fine. Anything from anywhere but the *Stronghold* suited him. The long, stained counter stretched off to the right, and the entire length was crammed with food and people. It reminded him of prison mealtime except there appeared to be little chance of anyone trying to tackle and rape him.

A cheesesteak with fries sounded perfect. As he waited for his order, an exhaustive wave rushed over him. To go to sleep a prisoner and wake up a furlowed individual, while legally instantaneous, caused the prisoner a respectable amount of stress. Thoughts of where he should sleep and where to find someone to sleep with rattled around his head. How does one live on the outside? Jeo chuckled inwardly—in just five years he had forgotten twenty-three years of life. Strange.

His food arrived, and he dropped all thoughts to focus entirely on eating. Many inmates had said that nothing compared to that first meal in freedom. Jeo wanted to savor the experience. Minutes later it had been devoured and the moment gone. Though satisfying, the meal did not measure up to the talk. Few things ever do, he thought. He glanced down the counter—several seats were now empty. How long had he been here? Not too long. He felt sure of that. His hand brushed a lukewarm cup of coffee. Next to the coffee, a small readout in the counter displayed his bill.

A quick pat down was enough to know he had no money. The courtyard exits were too far to run. Someone would say something. To his left, a restroom door—just a small, one room type, completely enclosed. Not much choice.

Standing up, he wiped the crumbs from his pants and strolled toward the bathroom. Casually he passed the bathroom and followed the wall toward one exit. [*mative sir ready to initiate seq*] He looked for the voice but found nothing. No one had noticed him. As he neared the exit, he thought about how rarely things went as smoothly as that maneuver. Then a strange tingling began in his arm.

Darkness.

When he woke, Jeo's head felt numb. He opened his eyes, just a slit, and looked around without moving his body. He did not want anyone knowing he was awake until he felt safe. Another small room but different from the first—a bureau, a mirror, a chair. His head rested on a pillow, his body on a bed. No clothes on. Nobody in the room that he could see. Very slowly, he fully opened his eyes and sat up in the bed.

The room was nothing special. A typical single occupancy with enough space to sleep and dress but not to live in—most activities were done elsewhere on the ship. Which ship was he on anyway? Standing up, Jeo touched the wall console for its main menu. Still on the *Jumpstart*.

He tried to recall what had happened but his memory stopped at the restaurant. Prison had taught him to keep an eye open and be prepared for anything; however, this was not prison. New place, new rules. He glanced around the room again hoping to find some clue to explain his situation.

Opening one of the bureau's drawers, he found his blue suit, gently folded and placed inside. Next to the clothing, he discovered a green, translucent card with his name etched on the side and the words "Handle With Care. Do Not Destroy Under Severe Penalty" printed across the top. He picked it up, looked at himself in the mirror through it and tossed the card on the bed. Then he threw his clothes on the floor and watched the yellow tie slide out of the coat. The tie.

Forget all that, he scolded himself and grabbed his underwear. As he began dressing, he felt it. The back of his right leg—metal. His heart began to beat hard and with a swift move he jumped onto the bed to see his leg in the mirror.

Metal. A small rectangular piece that met flush with his skin glinted from the overhead light.

“Shit,” he whispered, afraid to speak any louder.

When he ran his hand over the piece, part of it slid open revealing a chamber the size of the translucent card. He was not surprised. The second he saw the back of his leg, he knew the card would be part of it all.

Sitting on the bed, he picked up the card and stared at it. There was nothing else to do. He already hated it, already feared it, and already knew that whatever they planned for him would make him angry. If only Bishop had been more understanding, more human. Yet none of that past would ever change. He had no choice now. He bit into his bottom lip, closed his eyes, and inserted the card into his leg.

*[James “Jeo” Lummin, arrested for the murder of Rochar Bishop, having served five of thirty-five with no appearance of improper behavior during incarceration, please remain lying down and keep your eyes closed. When you become more acquainted with your augmentations, you may be able to walk, eat, and perform normal duties while being instructed, but for the moment keep still and simply listen. A small speaker has been embedded into your ear—only you can hear my voice. You have been chosen to partake in a parole experiment, which, if successful, will benefit all prisoners and all law-abiding citizens of the fleet. At the signature order of Warden DiPallo, I have been instructed to brief you on your situation. You may call me Bob. You are the eleventh High Security inmate to have been readmitted into society under our direct supervision. Every morning an order card like the one you are listening to will be placed in your room. It will give you specific instructions concerning your duties for that day. Generally, you will be helping maintain the exterior of the ships, assisting the mechanics in engineering, or aiding numerous offices with clerical work. You will not be paid for this work and you are not permitted to carry currency of any kind. Food and necessities will be provided to you by Fleet High Security Detention. Your limited freedom will be considered payment. You have been implanted with two*

*monitoring systems, one in your brain and one in your heart. The attempt to remove either of these will cause death. These systems report directly to FHSD's main control center. In your right arm is an injection implant filled with tylapene. It is the strongest sedative. Any illegal actions on your part will result in immediate sedation followed by augmentation. Trying to leave a restaurant without paying is illegal. Your first penalty augmentation was the instruction device implanted in your leg that you are currently using. Further augmentations will be of a more serious nature—each designed to help you behave in a law-abiding manner. We apologize for any confusion you may initially have incurred. You woke up unexpectedly and we were not completely online with you until you had finished your meal. We accept full responsibility for that error. Today's assignment is with Pohl Wefter. He is waiting for you at 21-H. Do not be tardy. Tardiness is a penalty. Remember this—It is inner-strength that sees a man through all troubles.]*

Bastards! Jeo jumped to his feet and spun around. Were they watching him? The mirror? With a hard pull, he tore the mirror off the wall. Nothing. Bastards! He raised his leg and scratched at the console until it let the instruction card loose. Then he smashed the card against the bureau. He lifted it high in the air and brought it down again with a loud snap. [ouble with adjustment sir shou] His face turned red with a rage that tensed all of his muscles. He smacked his ear twice. Shut that damn thing off! He wanted to scream but feared drawing more attention. Instead, he picked up the pieces of the card and threw them across the room. His entire body shook as he crumpled to the floor, fear and anger attacking each other within him. Then he felt the tingling in his arm. "Oh, shit," he said.

Darkness.

When he woke, he was naked and on the bed. His throat felt dry and his mouth burned. Raising his groggy head, he first noticed a blue, translucent card on the bureau. Then he saw his face in the mirror—two metal bumps on either side at the jaw. Before he bothered to try opening his mouth, he knew they had clamped it shut. He also knew they were aware he

was awake. Grudgingly, he retrieved the card and inserted it into his leg.

*[Good morning. This is Bob and these are your orders: You will report to Hanger B for an outside detail. It has been our experience with the other inmates in this program that only two augmentations are required before full compliance is achieved. We hope you continue this trend. I read once that a man can be fooled only by himself, that he can never be deceived by the lies of others when he understands his true self nature. Do you know yours?]*

Jeo removed the card and gently rested it on the bureau. He closed his eyes and sighed. Behind him sat the prisoner's life filled with endless orders, constant observation, and acute fear. Before him awaited the paroled life with endless orders, constant observation, and acute fear. It felt beyond ridiculous, but for the moment, he could see no alternative but to consent.

As he quickly dressed for work, he discovered a small round pin in his trouser pocket. Made with gold, the round pin had been etched with a picture of Earth. Jeo smirked. The day he had been given this pin started all his trouble.

He had been living on Earth for only four years, most of his life he resided on Mars, when two men presented the greatest opportunity in everyone's life. They had been travelling around the world spreading their idea, yet they appeared plain spoken and simple. Not the corner shouters one usually found. To anyone who would listen, they offered the gold Earth pin and an extraordinary proposal—a second fleet of settlers.

Long before Jeo had been born, the first fleet soared away for a habitable planet discovered by the deep space probe Kexley. After the settlers sent word they had arrived, they cut all communications. Common legend followed that the settlers cut off contact in order to hoard the plentiful lands and boundless opportunities of the new planet. The idea of another fleet filled many hearts with great hope. *[unsure if Lummin will accede waiting furth]*

The sound in his ear startled him. Dropping the pin, he pulled on his coat and darted out of the room. The last thing he wanted was another augmentation. *[ooking good now but he mi]* He reached a wall console and received directions to Hanger B. He needed to travel practically the whole length of the ship, so he asked the console for the location of a tube transport entrance. Fortunately, the tube was nearby. He sprinted to the entrance and pushed the call button several times. Two minutes passed before the transport arrived. Several other people boarded with him, each entering a destination and taking a seat. Another minute and they were moving. Jeo rested his head against the transport's wall. A moment passed before he could feel it, but once he took notice he could not ignore it—the stares. Everyone on the transport snatched glances at him, at his face, his jaw. The FHSD must have warned the public of the paroles. They all knew. They all notably looked away from him, and in so doing, burned their disapproving eyes into him. He hated them all. Why wouldn't they leave him alone? Sitting there, surrounded, he closed his eyes hoping this hell would vanish.

Earth had been another hell. Too many people, too much construction, too much noise. Everywhere he looked other lives encroached upon him. Foul odors and fouler scenes dominated his daily existence. Although there were beautiful places on Earth, only the rich could afford to go. Africa and Central America offered the best opportunity to escape and enjoy nature, but again, those pleasures came with an exclusionary pricetag.

For many, the idea of pioneering appealed greatly, and Jeo thought about it for less than a minute before signing up. Then he learned of the cost—more money than he could make in ten years. The money, Fleet Organizers explained, would help build and supply the seven thousand ships required for the twenty year journey. That made no difference to Jeo. He had no money.

The months passed and he watched as others prepared for the various launches—those wealthy ones who benefited on Earth anyway. He saw their excitement grow, their hopeful dreams arise, their hearts swell. Desire turned to envy, envy

grew into hate, and hate swiftly became desperation—until he found a solution.

As the fleet slowly headed out of the solar system, waiting for all the ships to be built and launched, the crews discovered numerous stowaways. At every stop possible, they sent home more and more people illegally aboard. No punishment—just sent home. Jeo decided to try his luck. The test was simple—stay hidden until the ship had passed the science lab on Io. No other outpost existed beyond that one, and the fleet had announced that anyone discovered after that time would be accepted into the public ranks with a stiff public service penalty. He only had to reach Io. Even if it meant cleaning toilets for ten years, in the end, he would have escaped Earth.

Jeo slipped aboard the next available ship, the *Splendor*, and began a long period of waiting. He spent most of the next three months scrounging for food and keeping quiet in the immense cargo bay. He had wedged himself in a small gap between several crates and moved little during that time. He watched as other stowaways were discovered and carried off but held onto his hope. Much of the time he slept, dreaming of a shining future, or listened to his grumbling stomach. Twice the crew announced the passing of Io and twice they rounded up several individuals who fell for the ruse. All this time, unless he sought food, Jeo remained still.

“Wake up!” a gruff voice barked.

Jeo looked up wearily. A large, unshaven man with three earrings stood over him. The tube had stopped in one of the huge hangers, and the man stared at him intently. The constant mechanical noises, once Jeo took notice, crowded out every other sound—except the man above him.

“Come on, wake up! Get on your feet!” Jeo complied and the man continued, “You are pathetic, you know that? You’ve only been in the program less than a week and already had two augments. That’s ridiculous.”

The mention of augmentation brought Jeo fully to the present. He had reached his assignment and did not want to mess it up. He rubbed the metal bumps on his jaw.

The man chuckled, “They shut you up. Jaws been clamped. You can’t speak unless I hit the release switch. Go on, try it.”

Jeо tried. As he had suspected, his vocal chords still worked, but his jaw refused to open. He grunted out a few curses while the man laughed at him. Then, to prove the point further, the man press a small button on his belt, and Jeо felt a little pop in his jaw. He opened his mouth gently, the muscles in the back sore and slow to react. However, before he could speak, the man pressed the button again and his jaw snapped shut.

“Okay, so now you got the deal and I expect you to behave while you’re working for me. If you need to talk, just point to your jaw. You call me Boss. Got it? Good,” Boss said and stepped over to a red box. Jeо thought it might be a toolbox. “Outside job today. You’ll suit up, go out and install this box at the test mark. We’re running an experiment for Fleet Lab. That’s all there is too it. Simple.”

With a sigh, Jeо followed Boss into a side chamber where he could suit up. The whole process took less than fifteen minutes, and before he had fully accepted his situation, he stood in an airlock waiting to step into space. Boss watched him from the safety of the ship and shot him a thumbs-up. He could see the laughter, see the slight shake of the head. Jeо lifted his gloved hand and started to raise his middle finger but stopped. What if that gesture was considered a violation of his parole? What would they hook up to him? He lowered his hand and turned away. Then the outer door opened.

Tugging on a clip, he checked the line securing the red box to his waist. He reached outside the door and pulled a long line that snapped to his suit. Then he faced the inner door and backed out. As he drifted away, he felt the tug. The magnetic security system had been turned on, spinning him around and slapping his back against a plate on the ship. Upon contact, the plate began moving, taking him up the side of the ship toward its top.

“Okay,” Boss said through the comm-viewer in the helmet. “Magsec is running fine. You’ll be topside in about a two

minutes.”

Jeo tried to stay still, gazing out at the fleet and space. The *Stronghold* hung behind them, following him like the moon did back on Earth—always there, always watching. Below him, a small farmdome shifted its position to capture more starlight for amplification. The other ships spread out across the darkness in an impressive display.

Initially, he thought he would be scared stepping out into space, but instead he felt calm. He found it peaceful—the first peace he had experienced in over five years. It washed over him, eased him, and for the briefest moment, let him feel free. *[ubject following predicted rates however I advise cautious pro]* Wincing, Jeo shook his head. Why didn’t they fix that during the last augmentation? Don’t they know he can hear them? Probably do, but they don’t care. They want him to know they’re in his head.

Rochar Bishop had that same attitude. He could have simply reported Jeo, but he wanted Jeo to know hope had ended. The incident began after a long interval of peace had passed aboard the *Splendor*. Still hiding, Jeo had fallen into the routine of doing nothing and hunting for food. One day, the crew announced for the third time that they had passed Io. They insisted this was not a trick and that food awaited all stowaways in the common hall.

Jeo did not believe this any more than he had the first two times. However, the following day, they once again made the announcement and the smell of food drifted throughout. Could it be true? Eventually they had to pass Io, so eventually it had to be true. Hunger gnawed at him as much as hope. He decided to risk finding out.

He waited until ship lights were turned down for “night” and slithered from hall to hall in search of answers. At one point, he turned down a long corridor and heard crewmembers coming from the other end. A door to his left was unlocked, so he darted inside the room. There he met Rochar Bishop.

The man casually glanced up from his desk and smiled. “Can I help you?”

Jeo spun around, visibly frightened, and stared. Rochar Bishop had a large, round face and thinning hair. He wore a dark suit with a dark shirt and a bright, yellow tie. Covered with papers, his desk wrapped around him in a U-shape, and on one end stood a sculpture of a naked man holding a sword above his head.

“What’s the matter?” Bishop asked. “Can I get you something? A drink?”

A pause. Then Jeo took a chance. “Have we passed Io?” he asked.

“What?”

“The lab on Io. Have we passed it?”

Bishop raised an eyebrow. “You’re a stowaway,” he said matter-of-factly. “Please, sit down. Feel free to lock the door if it will make you more comfortable.”

Jeo hesitated. He weighed out his options and concluded he had no choices at the moment. With a tremble, he locked the door and asked, “What do you want?”

“Ah, the direct approach. How obvious. Well, frankly, I’m curious why you think I shouldn’t turn you in.”

“Then we haven’t passed Io.”

“No,” Bishop said with a grin.

Jeo looked down at his hands and sat down. “So what do you want?”

“You mean so that I don’t turn you in?”

“Yes.”

“Just answer my question,” Bishop chuckled. “Explain yourself to me. I’m truly interested. I’ve been watching day after day how we find more and more of you. Not just on this ship, but fleetwide we find stowaways. I suppose I understand the initial impulse. Those who crave a great change in their lives, those who wish to explore space, those who are simply running away, they all have reasons. Hell, we all do.”

“What’s yours?”

Standing up, Bishop looked out the window behind him. “I’m afraid I must admit that my reason is profit. On Earth, I’m just another wealthy person who does little in life. But out here, especially when we land, the opportunities will be enormous. Think about it. The planet has already been settled. We won’t have to endure the hardship of starting from scratch. All we have to do is pick out our land and start an empire. So I plan to do just that. Whatever industry is most in demand, I will conquer and control.” Facing Jeo, he placed his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “That’s my reason. Now, why are you here?”

“I...I just want a better life.”

Bishop nodded as if he expected the answer and it did not meet his criteria. “We all want a better life. Everyone in this fleet seeks that in one form or another. What I’m really asking you is what makes you think you are entitled to this opportunity. Do you understand? Most of these people out here, almost all of them, have given up everything they ever owned, borrowed all they could, did whatever they had to in order to come up with enough money to buy a seat. Even those like myself who already had the money, we had to give up comfortable lives, social acceptance, and wonderful homes. All these sacrifices so that we could take this journey. So why is it you feel you should be given a free pass?”

Jumping to his feet, Jeo slammed his hand on the desk. “Why is it you think only those with money deserve this chance? I’ve got every right! Hell, I’ll actually work for the survival of us all, not just my own profiteering. You’re the bastard who doesn’t deserve a seat.”

Bishop laughed. “Do you really think screaming at me is going to help you? This is proving pointless. I really thought I might learn something, but clearly you’re just another waste of valuable space. So, whatever your dreams were, you should say goodbye to them now.” He walked behind the desk and turned on his comm-viewer.

Jeo wasted no time. He lunged over the desk and attacked the man. Punching him over and over, each swing a release of the weeks he had spent not moving. His body thrived on the

adrenaline, feeding like a ravenous animal as he ripped off Bishop's yellow tie and began to strangle the man. Tighter. Tighter. Bishops mouth open in a grotesque kiss. He flailed his arms and kicked his legs. Jeo yanked him back on the desk, the two men wrapped around each other. Tighter. Their faces came close together and Jeo saw Bishop—witnessed the fear, the painful struggle, the panic, the regret.

He dropped Bishop. "No," he whispered and got off the desk.

Bishop breathed deeply, coughed, and rolled off the other end of the desk. Jeo heard a thump and a strange gurgle. He darted around the desk to find that Rochar Bishop's sculpture had pierced his wealthy neck. He also discovered that the comm-viewer had transmitted the entire event to Fleet Security. Within a day, he was arrested, tried, and sentenced for murder. Later, he learned that they had actually passed Io, that until he killed Bishop, he was a free, valid citizen of the *Splendor*.

Watching the fleet slip by him, magnetically stuck to the *Jumpstart*, Jeo began to wonder why he had come in the first place. Earth had been bad but not unbearable. The arguments to leave had been convincing but not irrefutable. No valid reason existed for the pressure he put upon himself to get away from Earth. No, he thought, there was one reason—a dream, a hope, for a better life. Only nothing better came of the trip.

"Okay, now," Boss said, his fuzzy image appearing on the comm-viewer. "You're about to stop in a half-cage. When you feel the magsec disengage, immediately grab on to one of the bars and spin around. Then clip onto the tether and use the rungs to climb up to the test site. Nod if you got it."

Jeo nodded and Boss cut the communication. A few seconds later the plate pulled Jeo into a cage that wrapped around the top half of his body. The moment it stopped, he felt the plate let go of him. Obeying his orders he grabbed the bars in front of him and flipped around to the outer side. With his free hand, he grabbed hold of his belt clip and attached it to the tether. Then he stopped.

“Something wrong?” Boss asked, appearing once again.

Yes, Jeo thought. Everything was wrong. He had taken an enormous risk to gain the hope of seeing a dream fulfilled—to start a new life on a new planet. Only that would never happen. He would spend the rest of his life either in prison or being augmented into some freakish thing. *[e may have a problem]*

Wrapped in the suit, he could not swipe at his ear, but the voice said enough. There would be another augmentation, another destruction of his body, and he would have to suffer for the rest of his life. Already he could feel his arm tingling.

No, he thought. Then with a loud groan that filled his helmet, he unclipped the line and pushed away from the ship. As he watched the ship become smaller, his eyes glazed over.

Darkness.

When he woke, Jeo knew he was not dead. That fact did not surprise him. They had put too much work into him to just let him float away. What did surprise him, however, was that he sat in his old prison cell aboard the *Stronghold*. He recognized it immediately. The tiny, moldy room with no windows, the steel door, and the dribble of air coming through the crusty vent could never be replaced. Worse, he felt glad to be back—to be home.

On the floor he saw a red, translucent card. They had put him back in prison but apparently wanted a final word. Okay, he sighed to himself and snatched the card.

*[This is Bob and this is our final message. You have failed the parole program and have been returned to your prison cell for the remainder of your sentence. We are greatly disappointed in you. Any indiscretion other than attempted suicide would have only resulted in further augmentation, but this act cannot be ignored nor condoned. You will never have this chance at freedom again. It has been said that a man is no longer a man once he has lost his hope. Clearly you have lost yours. If the fault is ours, then I apologize. I am curious what you have become, and while we cannot permit you to be paroled again, there are uses your experience and current*

*mental state may have. If you are interested in reducing your sentence by a minimum of five years or possibly as much as twenty, FHSD has an alternative experimental program for you to consider. To agree to this program, simply say so. If you do not wish to participate, then I sincerely hope the best for you in your circumstances.]*

Jeo pull the card out of his leg and stared at it. Destroy a man, then offer him the chance to reduce his sentence to practically nothing. For what? A pop in his jaw let him know he could speak if he chose. The sound echoed in his head, reverberating the undeniable damage they had already done to him. What more could they do? He had long ago given up his possessions, they had taken away his rights, and even his body no longer belonged to him. He only owned his mind, and he firmly believed that ownership to be tenuous at best. In exchange, he already dreamed of a reduced sentence and the possibility of one day touching soil.

In a clear, unwavering voice, Jeo said, “I’ll join. But you remember this—a man with nothing is a truly free man. Bob, you have made me a free man.”

A moment passed. Another. Nothing happened. Jeo shook his head. He could not believe a little defiance had scared them off. Then, before he attempted anything else, he felt the familiar tingling in his arm. He smiled picturing the house he would build when they finally land, the wife he would find and love, the life he would enjoy until he died.

Darkness.

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## Realities

Lawrence D. P. Miller

Three cruel realities haunt me still, nearly five years later.

The first is that her death was neither instantaneous nor painless. After she was shot, she staggered across the parking lot, crying out for help, even as her murderers fled. She made it about twenty yards before she collapsed, but she was conscious and speaking—and aware she was about to die—for about four minutes.

The second is the sheer unlikelihood of her death. She was diving out of the back seat of her car, and was shot with a .22 Derringer as she fell to the pavement. A Derringer isn't made to carjack or kidnap people—it's a weapon of desperation, of last resort, and of poor accuracy. He was shooting at a moving target, while in a moving car, while high on cocaine. He should have missed. But the bullet entered sideways, from under her left shoulder, and traveled up through her heart.

The latest, and by far the cruellest reality is that I am now older than she ever was. At age twenty-four, I have been alive longer than my older sister had been. Every second of my existence feels stolen.

Almost twenty of her neighbors called 911, and the police and rescue units arrived after less than five minutes. She drifted in and out as the paramedics worked on her, and the police tried to figure out what had happened. One of her neighbors, a priest, administered last rites to her; he apologized to us later when he found out we were Jewish, but we thanked him, and wept together. We can only hope she knew he was there, knew that she was not dying alone.

I'm spared one thing, I suppose—there's nothing I could have done. I was a hundred miles away, in the middle of the first semester of my sophomore year. I hadn't just returned

from visiting her (“If only I had stayed a little longer!”), she hadn’t just returned from visiting me (“Why did I let her drive home so late?”), we hadn’t made plans for that day that were broken at the last minute (“I should have gone!”). Some people crumble under the weight of their own feelings of guilt; I’m not one of those people.

I’m faced with a different burden, one from which I may never be able to escape. It’s the same fear that many people who lose siblings endure—that my parents, in secret places of their souls that they share with no one, perhaps not with each other, or even themselves, wish I had died instead of her. Sometimes I feel the need to justify myself, to prove that I’m deserving of life. And sometimes that justification feels like a betrayal, as if I had a choice, and I chose for me to live and her to die.

Which I suppose brings us back to the present. I’ve been working odd jobs, mostly as a programmer, to make ends meet since I dropped out of college. Or, perhaps, college dropped out of me. I’m only a few credits short of graduation, with a major in Computer Science and a minor in Physics; I plan to return and finish up someday. The current “me” can never go back to school, but perhaps some future “me” can.

As the last traces of academic desire dripped from my soul, I was in a class on Quantum Mechanics. Mostly theory, the EPR experiment, “spooky action at a distance”, wave functions, et cetera. We read about the various theories people have come up with to explain quantum weirdness, including parallel universes. And not like the bad TV and movie kind, where people are popping through parallel universes like they’ve got their own exits on the New Jersey Turnpike. I’m talking about when you flip a coin, and it comes up heads, your universe splits (or forks, or spawns, for you computer geeks out there) a new copy of itself, and in one copy it’s heads, and in the other it’s tails. You never know about your other “self” who’s looking at the eagle instead of George Washington.

For a long time, people have been repeating daily affirmations, or mantras, or whatever, in an effort to change

something about their lives. Most people assume that this just conditions the mind to facilitate these positive changes, and that may be true, but it doesn't explain my results.

Three years ago, I wrote a computer program to "randomly" flip a coin every few seconds and show a picture of the coin to me on the screen. I realize that computer randomization isn't exactly random, but it should take thousands of years for patterns to show up, so I'm considering it random enough for my purposes.

Anyway, I spend an hour a day staring at the screen, willing the coins to come up heads. For the first four months, I got about the results you'd expect—I was right almost exactly 50% of the time. Some days I'd get up around 51%, others down around 49%, but all in all, well within the standard deviation.

And then something changed. At first it was hard to notice—fewer days fell below 50%, and more were up in the 51% region. I went an entire month without having a day under 50%, and I knew something was happening. I reached 53% one day, which I considered an important milestone. My confidence increased, and along with it, my success rate.

After sixteen months, I varied the program a little. I tried different coins, including foreign currency, and different "flipping rates". I even randomized the amount of time between flips. My success rate continued to rise over 60%, fed by my confidence and desire to succeed. To take control of this tiny aspect of my life. To influence the universe.

Last week, I reached another milestone. I read the funny papers while the program was running, and still maintained my 60% success rate. It was no longer necessary for me to concentrate on the results; my awareness of the process and the knowledge that I was influencing it was sufficient to successfully influence the process. I don't deny that it's circular reasoning. In fact, I'm depending on it.

I don't pretend to understand the process that allows me to consciously or unconsciously influence these coin tosses. Niels Bohr and others have basically said that it's pointless to

even try to understand; that the questions themselves are meaningless. I confess that's rather an oversimplification.

Before you take your hand away and look, the tiny coin is not heads, nor is it tails, but is in an indeterminate state in which it is both, and neither. Some scientists call this "superposition", or a state "above" the states that we usually think about, namely "heads" and "tails". The nebulous, superposed coin has a 50% chance of being heads, and a 50% chance of being tails. Maybe the coin was an amorphous, supernatural entity before we lifted our hand, and only became "real" when we looked. Or maybe we simply split off into a universe where the coin was heads (or tails) all along. I don't know, and frankly, I don't really care. I don't care if it's quantum physics or just plain magic. It seems to work.

Yesterday I reached my most important milestone yet. I turned off the computer and flipped the damn coin myself. I couldn't flip it as rapidly as the computer, of course, and I dropped it and caught a glimpse some of the time, but my success rate was nearly 70% over the course of 300 flips.

Which brings me to today. I seem to be able to steer myself into universes where the coin comes up heads. I'm therefore stepping up the experiment to something a bit more grand. In just over an hour, I'm having myself hypnotized. I've been assured that I can be convinced, even if only for a little while, that my sister is in fact still alive.

And that's why I'm writing this, as an account of what I'm attempting to do. Who knows, maybe I'll successfully skip over to a universe in which she's still alive, and I'll have no memory of writing this. Maybe something will go disastrously wrong, and I'll lose myself completely. Whatever the case, I can only hope that I'm successful, and that this record remains somewhere, sometime, and people can learn from my experiences.

With any luck, someday it might be my nieces and nephews who read this.

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## Mama's Tree

Bill Vernon

The tree ate Mama fifteen minutes after I told her, "That big old tree out front is dying. It's lost so many leaves I can see clear up its trunk from my bedroom window."

Mama answered, "Only a fool would stink up the room where they eat. God knows why they put that door into the kitchen and not into the mud room."

"You told me that a hundred times, Mama."

"What're you doing in there?"

"Brushing my hair by the mirror."

"Well, it's time to come on out here and eat."

I went to the table, sat down and drank half a glass of my orange juice.

Mama said, "My grandpa planted that tree when he was a boy."

"You told me that a thousand times before."

"The way we live is causing this drought. Electricity and all. Now some of the very best good things are dying."

I went and got her plastic bottle of pills and dropped it rattling on the table in front of her.

Mama looked at me. "Does little Miss Smarty think I need a pill?"

"You're going to cry if you don't take one," I said, and gulped down the rest of my orange juice.

"Don't I know it, Honey. Don't I just know it."

Mama swallowed three pills instead of one, and stared out the window at the garden. I ate my toast and jam, then her corn

flakes. Well, heck, she wouldn't eat no more until noon, and I was hungry.

Mama didn't say nothing else. Didn't have to. I knew she hated cars and other machines. She said so enough times I had what she thought memorized. Mama lived in the past. That's what everybody said, and that's why Daddy quit living here. Least ways I think that's why. Daddy's a salesman, rides around peddling stuff from his car. Hasn't been here in a long time.

Fifteen minutes later, I was in the attic, looked out the gable window, and there was Mama way up in that tree.

"What you doin', Mama!? Get down!"

Mama saw me, but didn't say nothing. She sat on a limb and stuck her hand in the trunk. That surprised me. I'd never noticed a hole there before.

Mama's arm went in. Then her head. Then she was inside as far as the waist as if that tree was swallowing her.

"Mama!" I hollered, then hurried off down the ladder, down the stairs, and outside. Mama was completely gone. I looked up from the roots and couldn't see nothing of her.

I climbed up the slats Daddy had nailed on, and from where they ended at the first big limb, I used the branches like they were rungs on a stile.

Yep, there was a great big hole up where Mama went in. I hollered into it, but she never answered. I couldn't see much 'cause it was so dark inside, but even though coons or squirrels with sharp teeth could be there, I shoved my head in anyways.

The hole went straight down the trunk with a light at the bottom like the trunk opened up at ground level.

Where could Mama be? Maybe in a big hollow limb. Maybe knocked out in the darkness somewhere. I held my breath and went in head first—without thinking about it until the arches of my feet caught on the edge of the hole. Well, heck, that was a long way down and I got afraid of falling.

Strange thing was, the blood never rushed to my eyeballs like it did when I hung upside down. Eventually, I got enough nerve to crawl right down inside the trunk to the bottom.

The light was ground level all right, but I couldn't recall that big hole being there before.

"Come on out here, Honey," Mama's voice called.

I crawled out, stood up beside Mama, and saw we were in a very different world.

"What happened to our yard and the fields and the subdivision?" I asked. "Where's our house?"

Mama started walking. "This here is what I want you to see. Ain't I always took care of you?"

"I took care of you for two years," I said, remembering her Alzheimer's disease.

"Yes, you did, but a person who sells off her family's property ought to know what she's getting rid of. You're 70 years old now, Honey. You got to start thinking for yourself. Just this one more time I'm going to help you."

She led me to the top of a hill and stopped. "Right here is where our house will be built. Look around."

There wasn't nothing here but trees. I whirled around looking. As far as I could see in any direction, trees! No rooftops at all.

Mama led me off the hill in another direction. Around us inside the forest were millions of white and blue flowers and frilly ferns that tickled my knees.

"Know where we are?" Mama asked.

"Lost?"

"Heavens no. We're walking along where our lane's gonna go. Off to the right is where those new ranch houses will be."

"Oh yeah." I recognized how the land sloped in familiar ways. "Look. There's a creek where our ditch is."

She took me to its bank, and I'd never seen the ditch like that. It was clean as water from the spigot, and crawdads and minnows and some larger fish were in it. Mama pointed to tracks in the mud, and said they were made by bobcats and turkeys.

"That reminds me," she said. "I heard there was a prairie down where the town's first buildings went in. Come on."

I had to run to keep up, she was so excited. I skipped along as best I could while we hurried among the giant trees.

When we stopped, we were both panting. It took me a minute to calm down and see that the big open space ahead was covered with a swirling mess of weeds and grass. It was all growing and healthy, I knew, because the brown tops led down to green at the bottoms, and big animals were feeding in it.

"Hold me up?" I asked Mama, and climbed on her back. "Those are buffaloes!"

"Yes," she said. "And over there are some deer. Why, no, they're too way too big for deer. They have to be moose or elk or something like that."

We walked around the edge of the trees until we came to a path so wide we could go side by side on it back into the woods. Mama proceeded to tell me about bears and beaver and other animals that lived there. And Indians.

"You mean we might get scalped?"

She looked at me and laughed. "I'm talking about the people who lived here before any white people came and killed and took over. They're the ones started scalping. Anyway, I got no idea where Indians lived around here. Ain't that a shame? We don't even know where those poor native people lived."

"I'd like to see them," I said. "I'd like to play with them."

"So would I, Honey. So would I."

We arrived at a lake where the shore was all trampled by hooves and paws. Ducks and other kinds of birds floated on

maybe a city block of open water, and in among cattails and reeds that grew around the edges and back up into trees. All the noise from all the creatures around us made me think of a nursery full of children.

“This here is what your grandpa called the back-forty acres.”

I said, “Ain’t no water in that field now.”

“Not anymore. Your great grandpa drained it. In fact, this swamp is what let his daddy, your great, great grandpa, get the land in the first place. It kept the price down so he could afford to buy it. Made it unattractive to other farmers and builders too. Lots of mosquitoes here, you know? Come on, we’ll cut over to the left and make our way back.”

Pretty soon, back at the tree, I sat between two huge roots that rose up out of the ground like arm rests, leaned back against the bark, said I was tired, and took a deep breath. There was a freshness and cleanliness in the air I couldn’t remember smelling before, and I heard all kinds of animals chirping or snorting, or bellowing or what have you, signaling to each other. Not one motor churned or chugged. No heavy equipment clanged steel.

Mama said, “Open those eyes, Honey. You can’t rest yet. Come on.”

I followed her on hands and knees back through the hole in the trunk. We stood up inside, and had plenty of elbow room.

Mama said, “You can’t go up unless you go down. Roots are very important, but usually they’re hidden underground so you don’t notice them. Go on down there now and see for yourself. I’ll wait here.”

The passage was like a cave made of wood, but the smaller branches tapered off and glowed, flickering bright enough to let me see farther inside them. The first side root showed people in real heavy clothing, living in houses with dirt floors. In the next root down, the people wore furs and crouched around a fire and seemed to be in a cave. Finally, the tap root narrowed down to three much smaller branches, and in the

right and left one I saw these very hairy, low-browed people, stooped over, sneaking along with clubs in their hands. In the one root straight ahead were a bunch of big monkeys, screaming, jumping up and down, and beating on their chests.

“Ain’t that something?” Mama asked when I got back to her at ground level. “Them are all our ancestors too. People who got no name or history.”

“They didn’t all look like people to me,” I said.

Mama led me on up the trunk, and in the biggest branches shooting off around us, she named all the people that the glowing let me see. Of course I’d heard of some of them before, but there were so many, not a one stuck in my brain until I saw Mama’s grandparents, and then her parents, and then Mama herself.

“Right here’s where we came in,” she said, sticking her arm out the hole we had come to. “I’m going outside, but you go on and look what’s above here.”

I went on past the hole, and what do you know? I was looking at myself looking at me, just like I’d done in the mirror in the bathroom. That was confusing.

I hurried down, went out the hole, and found Mama already half down the tree. I followed her and didn’t say nothing until we got to the bottom.

Looking around down there, I said, “We are truly back home now.”

Our house stood fifty feet away. East of it were shingled roofs in the new suburb, and west was the field down the hill—Grandpa’s back forty acres. In the field on the other side of its fenceline, two yellow bulldozers were snorting, gouging out our neighbor Henry Johnson’s land, and around them ugly machines were red ribbons waving on hundreds of stakes in the ground.

“Child, do you understand now?” Mama asked.

“Maybe,” I said.

“This sure ‘nough is a good, old, solid tree.” She patted the rough bark. “But it’s sick and could be dyin’.”

“I know it’s your tree, Mama.”

“Well, that’s where you’re wrong, Honey. This here is our tree. And you’re the only one who might be able to save it.”

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## Keep It For Me

Stephen Crane Davidson

Kor-dhui yanked his sword from the first guard's belly just in time to parry the second guard's thrust. The clash echoed off barricaded doors and boarded windows then dissipated into the wisps of fog. The second guard edged away his eyes large with fear.

Suddenly freed from her captors, the dark-haired woman inched toward an alleyway. She glanced around as if not quite believing what happened. Above her, huge white moths with six inch wingspans darted and fried in the street lamp's flame.

Eyeing the woman's escape, the second guard hesitated and then wove his sword back and forth in a classic defensive position. He edged closer, cautious of Kor's size, as well as the slick offal that flowed down the black stone cobbled street. The air stank.

Kor, shoulder aching from the dampness, scowled, feinted with his sword, drew his knife left handed and threw it. The guard staggered, grabbed at the knife that now protruded from his chest and fell. Kor murmured a thanks to the whore goddess and recovered his bloodied weapon. He took a moment to wipe it on his pants then sheathed it. The woman scrambled up and then raced toward the glimmer of the next street.

Kor pounded after her, wincing from the pain in his knees and cursing himself for his folly. It would not do for the woman to be loose. They would find her, and she could identify him. Sweat rolled down his scar stained cheeks dampening his thick black and silver beard. He ran quite fast for a man of his size. Then, he'd had plenty of practice lately, damn the Aln and their rodent-faced, abominable, magic-using priests.

The two raced between fantastically tall four storey buildings whose shining green brocol wood used to glimmer in the evening torch light. Now a dull brown slime had covered the green and no one was cleaning it. Just so in the past, the late night street would have been teaming with brightly dressed carousers, the woman in gowns striped with startling hues woven between lengths of translucent gauze. Any movement at all set off a thousand delights. But now the joy had gone. The streets stood empty, few citizens daring to question the curfew set by the Aln invaders. Nor did Kor dare yell to the woman he had rescued. If she had not tripped on a rock that was in plain view, he never would have caught her. Even so, he was gasping for breath when he scooped her slight body off the street. He held her close, expecting a grateful hug for the rescue.

She bit him.

Yelping, he dropped her and grabbed her by the hair at the back of the neck. Her face clenched, he relaxed his grip—a little.

She reached back to pry his hands loose. “Let go.”

“You crazy? They were going to kill you.”

“I want to die. Get your hands off me.”

“Breath of the dragon’s whore, you’re mad.” He glanced around nervously and lowered his voice. “Don’t you know what the priests would do to you?”

Her upper lip curled into a snarl. “No worse than you.”

That did stop him for a moment. His plan had gone no further than taking her away from the Aln. A small strike against the hated invaders but at least a strike. She hardly seemed grateful. “I’ll do nothing to you,” he finally said.

“Aye,” she said, tried to twist away and gasped when he tightened his hold to pull her back. Years of handling a mercenary sword had earned him a powerful grip. The woman, for all her fight, barely came up to his chest. He hauled her to his horse and wrapping her in a ragged wool blanket from his

pack, sat her on the nag, then climbed up behind the struggling if diminutive form.

The dead guards would soon be missed by the priests. Kor forced his horse to a trot and winced at the sound. One priest seeing them was all it would take to end this escapade in an explosion of magical fire. His neck tensed. He pulled out a gilded circular pendant that hung under his tunic and prayed for luck. He tucked it back carefully.

They passed under the black stone arch of the East Jor Gate as rain began to fall in great soaking clumps. They had escaped, foiled the priests. Despite being wet, Kor grinned and pulled back on the reins. No sense in tiring the horse. On either side of them the massive stems of brocol trees rose up from the ground, their huge yellow flowered heads dripping water down on the path.

After several hours of riding, the woman slumped into his arms, and he wrapped her shivering form into his fur outer vest. She struggled only briefly. Rain trickled down his back, soaking his wool tunic from the inside.

For a moment, he considered halting. Surely the priests would not send soldiers after one missing sacrifice—they had a whole town to choose from. He looked behind him into the night, and a tight knot formed in his throat. There could be twenty swine-nosed, flame-tossing priests approaching in the darkness. The scent of burning flesh assailed his memory. He had smelled it once too often.

It had been but a year ago when Kor and his partner Jeferd had hired out to the Jorwen army. They met the Aln force just west of the mountains. Jeferd stood beside him, a mighty stump of a man wielding a bloody axe. The Aln fell in droves to the power of the mercenaries. The Jorwens rallied. They drove the Aln soldiers before them.

Kor surged ahead, swinging out and imbedding his sword in an Aln. The man grabbed the weapon. Another Aln appeared to the side. His weapon flashed. Kor tried to jerk away.

Jeferd sprang forward, the enemy's sword clashing against the axe. Kor pulled loose his weapon, impaled the attacker and tried to scream a warning as he dove to the ground. Too late.

Jeferd burst into flames.

His screams faded after a time. A black cowled priest slid into the midst of the Aln ranks, disappearing before the Jorwen archers could kill him.

In a year the smell did not fade. Kor decided to be cautious. They rode late into the night at a steady pace. Finally stopping, he cared for the horse and then tied up a tarp. By now they had left the brocol forest and were surrounded by the thinner trunks of ankor trees. Tall, single trunked and covered with great burdens of twisting green lark vines, the trees let in the rain only too well.

The woman eyed him, keeping a distance. Camp set, he motioned for her to come under the covering.

She glared at him. "What are you going to do to me?" Shaking with cold and the rain mingling dirt and matted hair on her pale cheeks, she waited for his reply.

"Spawn of the gods," Kor muttered under his breath. "Nothing," he replied. His joy at the priests not having her was wearing thin in the face of the rain and the woman's hostility.

She huddled at the edge of the covered space as far from him as she could sit. The rain dripped behind her. He unwrapped a strip of dried meat, cut off a piece and threw it to her. She ignored it. He scowled and continued to eat.

The meat was old and tough. He cut a last, flavorless chunk and considered throwing it to her.

"I am Kor-dhui. What are you called?" he asked instead, his food supplies being short.

"Cease."

"Strange name." He decided it fit her, popped the meat into his mouth and began drying his knife. The woman drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around her legs. A rent in her

dress exposed a length of pale, white flesh. He sheathed his knife and frowned.

Where was his thanks for saving her? "Old and soft in the head," he mumbled to himself. She peered at him with dark eyes and then looked away. Wondering what he was going to do with her and disgusted with himself now for having taken the chance to rescue her, Kor-dhui lay down to sleep. He pulled a small carved piece of polished oak out of his pocket, mumbled a prayer to the forest gods and then scowled. If he had left her in Jor there would be no one following him. He could have waited to leave until the rain had past. Now, the ground was rocky underneath him. Where it was not rocky, it was mud. That, he considered, was typical.

He woke sensing something amiss. The first weak rays of a cloud beggared sun lit the ground. He felt for his knife and panicked.

Cease was going to kill him.

Bolting upright, he saw her, his knife poised to plunge into her own heart.

"No," he screamed and lunged, knocking the weapon from her hand and both of them into the mud and rain. A small dragon, she scratched and fought with her teeth. Holding her only tight enough to keep from being hurt himself, he let her spend her rage.

Finally, she lay limp under him. The soaked tatters of her dress clung to her thighs. Her tunic had ripped open. From the looks of her, he wondered if she was even a woman yet. Her ribs stuck out in hard lines, her stomach was not so much flat as concave.

His gaze moved up and locked with hers. Her eyes were cold black jewels mounted on pale marble, looking distant as if her spirit had fled. Rampaging through sacked villages, the bloodlust in his heart, he had seen that look before. Wet and bones aching, now all it gave him was a tense hollowness in the pit of his stomach. He never had done what the others did. He killed because he had to. Hurting defenseless people was just as much an abomination as was the magic the whore god

taught. Besides, with a little gold the priestesses in the god's temple were not just skilled but willing. He looked away and sat up, letting go of Cease's arms.

"What is the matter with you?" he said and inspected the burning scratches on his arms.

She did not move or answer, but the distant look faded from her eyes.

Exasperated, he hauled her out of the mud and back under the tarp. He tugged the torn tunic back over her shoulder, covering a small, mud smeared breast.

She shivered and stared at him.

"I am blind," she said.

The only sound was the clatter of the rain on the tarp. Kor-dhui blinked and closed his mouth. He rubbed his eyes. The rain slapped into puddles in the mud.

"But how? You ran from me."

"I have the Sight and Sense. I see life around me. Nor have I always been blind."

At the word Sight, Kor went rigid. "Soured spill of a she-devil. You're accursed." Then the next thought struck like a blade. "Goddess, they'll not just be coming after you; there'll sure be a priest with 'em."

He jumped up and hit the tarp. Water poured off it. "Aieee," he roared and tried too late to duck away from the drenching.

"Didn't ask to be rescued," she said. "Leave me."

"No. You're little more than a child." He pulled out the circlet, the carved wood, an eagle's feather and last, what he'd been told was a dragon's tooth, and he frantically prayed to each, and after each prayer, he cursed.

"I was on my way to my temple when they found me. I am no child," she said.

"A priestess?" Kor said his eyes widening.

“Yes, of twenty anum.”

Kor shook his head. “They would never allow anyone with magic in the whore goddesses’s temple.”

“The Sight is not abomination. It does not kill.”

“Mmm. What temple are you from?” he asked.

“Norvah-dun in the south where the sun meets the water. But it is gone,” she said.

Kor grimaced and rubbed his wrists. He’d never been to Norvah-dun. Too far away. This was a bit much for one moment of thought. “Get up,” he ordered. “If you are a priestess then all the more reason you’ll go with me.”

“You worship the whore?” she said.

“Yes.”

Cease shook her head. “She is dead and her temples burned.”

Kor shrugged. “Gods do not die.”

“Then how could she have abandoned me and left me to the Aln?”

“Gods have their own ways,” he said doubtfully.

Cease’s shoulders drooped. The ripped tunic slid down her arm. “I am blind. My temple is burned, my family is dead. I have no one. Do what you like. You’re as good as the next.”

At that Kor scowled. The water had made white streaks down her skin where it had washed off the mud. “Wrap yourself in the blanket, priestess. Even if all others are dead, there is one of you and one of me. That will have to be enough.” They rode through kord-soaking drizzle. Docile, Cease did not object to being wrapped in his vest or to where his hands rested. She felt like a lump of bones against him, not a woman. He liked the dragon better. And what was he going to do with her?

He grimaced. What was he going to do with himself? His bones ached. How did he get so old?

By the time they reached the deep forest of wide limbed almatta trees that shaded thick leaved but lower growing bronze catussa berry bushes, the drizzle had given way to a dense fog. He felt stiff.

“We stop here,” he said, more to himself than Cease.

“Not if you would live.”

“What?”

“An Aln priest has entered the wood, not far behind.”

He tensed. “We’ll ride forward, lay a trap for them, kill the priest and then lose the—”

“No.”

“But—”

“There are men ahead.”

“Spit of the dreamin’ god’s whore! Who?” He grabbed the whore’s circlet under his vest and tugged on it.

“They don’t feel like the guards.”

Thieves. Fear flushed through him. Anger and an impossible idea remained. “Can the priest sense the thieves?”

“Thieves? Don’t know.” Her shoulders rose in a shrug. “Probably not. Few have the Sight and the Sense as I.”

“Good you do, priestess,” he said.

They dismounted and he tied the horse off the pathway. Kor explained his idea. To his surprise, she brightened at his plan. That he needed her help seemed to be pleasing. She led the way, holding his hand, her grasp now firm.

His breath quickened at every sound. A man coughed nearby and Kor shuddered. He drew his knife, then sheathed it when Cease pulled him forward. Despite the fog, she moved without pause, and he blessed her uncanny ability.

After what seemed far too long, she stopped. “We are close behind the one you wanted, the brightest feeling one. He stands in the center of their line,” she said in a low whisper, standing on tip-toe and putting her mouth up to his ear. Her

breath was warm. Her lips brushed against his ear-lobe, sending a shiver down his back. The priestesses were known for their myriad little charms. He shook his head, blinked, drew his sword and then slid a knife out of his boot.

The thieves would not attack a group of armed guards, not even in ambush—too much risk—too little to gain for them. But if they heard a cry from their leader... Kor-dhui waited for the sounds of the guards to near and studied the woman.

Facing death, penned in by edge less walls of fog, he began to understand her words. She had not lied: blind, her temple burned—she was alone. Her whole life before would have been devoted to the goddess and her service. And what that life had been was not at all like a barmaid that rolled in the hay for spare gold. In the temple there were the ceremonies, the zin drinking rituals, the dances, moves, touches, incenses and oils. It could last a night, even a weekend. During the day she would have been with the other priestesses. They would have been friends to her. All that was gone. Burned and killed no doubt. He shuddered. He knew about being alone with no partner to guard your back. No wonder she wanted to die. What was their left for her? She was right. The Aln had ruthlessly destroyed the temples. None were left that he knew.

Still, now her deep-set eyes had fire in them. Since leading him behind the thieves, she'd changed—shoulders erect and head high. Now, he could imagine her proud face pale above the voluminous burgundy and black robes that the priestesses wore during the day. Or later in the evening during the dances it would be her lithe, sinewy body barely covered by the green thigh length slips of worm thread that were wrapped at the waist with a golden length of cord and slit on each side to the top of the hip. He gazed at her for a moment longer and to his irritation, found a certain attraction growing. What could he do with her if she even wanted him? No home to take her to, no temples left and yet, he was old for a mercenary....

He growled under his breath, not liking where his thoughts were going. He was not that old. Besides, he probably wouldn't live out the day.

The clatter of tack disrupted his musings. He waited until the point rider was straight ahead. “Cease, show me again where the thief stands.”

She did and he stared where she pointed, but saw only dim, thorny berry bush shapes. “How far away?”

“Ten paces.” She shrugged.

He said a quick prayer to the whore goddess, hoping she still lived. Placing his feet heels first to the ground, he stalked forward until he could see the back of a man. Kor lunged forward, his sword piercing the thief’s side. The man yelled and started to twist around. Kor yanked free his bloodied weapon and slid back into the mist.

In moments, the metal and man sounds of battle rang through the woods. Kor hastened to where Cease waited and found her. She grabbed his arm. They ran.

Behind them, an unseen horseman crashed through the bushes. The leader of the thieves screamed again. Cease stopped, forcing Kor tight against her.

“What’s happening out there?” he said, caught his balance and peered into the grey.

“The thieves are retreating. Some of the guards follow. A few of the guards are gathered around the priest.”

“Can the priest see you?”

“No, though he can sense I am near as I can him.”

“But you can...see him...too?”

“Yes, over there.” She pointed.

“How far away?”

“About twenty paces.”

“Any between us?”

“No, the thieves have moved down the path now. A few of the guards are clustered in front of him but none to his side.”

The crashing din of battle softened. Kor bit his lower lip. “Quick now, lead me closer.”

She led him, sliding past trees. An arrow whistled close. He jerked her back.

The noise of battle grew louder again. Men roared their curses into the sight-robbing mist and blundered into the bushes screaming as the thorns slashed them.

“There!” Her arm darted up.

He sheathed his sword and shifted the boot knife into his right hand. Standing behind her, he sighted down her arm and pictured the priest, a black-cowled rodent image on the fat grey fog. He stuck his hand in his pocket and fingered the carved image. The edges were round and soft.

Kor forced himself to believe he aimed where Cease directed. He hesitated. Could he do it? The circlet lay on his chest, moisture dimming the shine.

Too far. He pushed forward, holding the knife ready. Had he moved too much to the side? His heart pounded.

Cease touched his arm. He jumped. “Give me the knife,” she said.

He lowered his arm.

“I can see.” Her voice sounded triumphant.

He let her take the weapon and watched her dart forward, her arm flashing. The blade disappeared and then she dove back to him. There was a thunderous clap. He staggered under the impact. The fog turned sun-bright opaque and then faded back to an even darker grey.

“I hit him,” she screamed.

Kor took her hand and dragged her. They hurried to the horse. Cease in front, Kor leading the horse, they wended through the mist-bound woods and away from the battle.

After a time, the fog began to eddy and break in a warming earth-scented wind. He could see the trees ahead. There was no pursuit.

He stopped to rest, catch his breath. Cease turned and looked up at him. Her face was soft. He studied her. She had

saved them both.

“You needed me,” she said quietly and lowered her gaze.

He gently cupped her chin and raised her head. Then he reached down and pulled his other boot knife. He’d never given it to anyone else but he handed it to her. It was the most he could do.

She held the blunt-ended haft in her palm. Her fingers curled round, not quite meeting.

They stood a few feet apart, silent. A butterfly winged up from a flower just as the horse’s teeth closed on the petals.

Cease ran a finger down the length of the blade, touched the end with the tip of her finger. Then she knelt in front of him and carefully slid the length back into his boot. She looked up and her eyes gone dark met his gaze and pulled it to hers. “A priestess does not have a knife,” she said. “Keep it for me.”

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## Embers that Remain

Lloyd Michael Lohr

Late Autumn winds blew in from the ocean, signaling the coming of Winter. Two silhouettes, cloaked in black, walked among the ruins of Tintagel. The voices of past days still echoed there. Painful days they were indeed.

“So, this is the place where my father and grandfather were born?” The figure asked as he looked out over the pounding ocean and swallowed hard, as if fighting back bittersweet emotions.

“Yes. This place, Tintagel, was the seat of Arthur’s realm and the birthplace of your father as well.”

“What of the Druid?”

“If I am not mistaken, the entrance to Merlin’s cairn should not be far from here. I can still sense some remnant magic about the air.”

“And what of her, Banba? What of the horrid witch that caused all this? Where does she live these days?”

“In due time, Rhianic, in due time. We shall tend to her soon,” Banba said as she looked out upon the ocean with her own sense of melancholy.

The two strangers slowly mounted their horses and road away. An air of finality was about them. So much so, that even the ravens on the henge ceased to caw in their presence.

*Up the coast, not far from the fortress ruins, sat the small village of Nudd. Populated mostly with fisherfolk and such, Rhianic and Banba decided that it would be a safe place to stay. As night approached, a storm was rolling in off the sea.*

*This was soon to be a night best spent by a warm tavern fire with a good meal and a good song, not knee deep in the cold mud and soaked to the bone.*

*“This is better than a damp evening in the woods, is it not?” asked Rhianic.*

*“Yes, it is,” Banba replied as she dismounted, “secure our horses while I buy us a room.” She moved with a fluid, almost otherworldly grace.*

*As Rhianic dealt with the stable hand, he noticed an old woman staring at him from across the way.*

*“You there,” he shouted, “wait a moment.”*

*He approached her with a degree of caution. His instincts told him to beware of Mab’s trickery, especially when Banba was not around.*

*“What is it that you stare at old woman?”*

*“You have the face of your father and his father. A Pendragon indeed. The black hair, the blue eyes, a Pendragon indeed,” she replied matter-of-factly.*

*“You knew my father and grandfather?”*

*“Oh, yes. I knew them both well. And Merlin...”*

*“What of Merlin old woman, what of Merlin?” he asked anxiously. She just smiled at him and began to walk away.*

*“Sir,” came a voice from behind Rhianic.*

*He turned abruptly.*

*“Here is your money pouch,” the stable hand said as he handed it over to Rhianic, “you left it on your horse. I thought you might want to keep it with you.”*

*“Thank you. Yes, I would prefer to keep it within sight.” Rhianic quickly turned once more but the old woman had vanished.*

*“It does look as if it might get rough this evening,” the stable hand stated, in an attempt to keep the conversation*

*going. Rhianic walked away. He did not even hear the young man's words.*

*“Damn,” he thought, “who was that old crone? Could it have been Mab?”*

Rhianic entered the tavern. Immediately the sounds of laughter and music inundated him. Outside it began to rain as lightening danced upon the storm clouds like wild fairies in a glen. It was a good night to be inside.

Banba had secured a corner table, a prerequisite for any traveler in a strange town. As Rhianic sat down he let out a sigh of frustration. Banba could tell that something was bothering him.

“What’s the matter Rhianic?” Banba asked in hushed whispers. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Someone recognized me, Banba. Someone knew of my birthright,” Rhianic took a deep breath, “she said that I resembled my father and my grandfather. She also spoke of Merlin.”

“That’s impossible. You’ve been away from here since you were very young. No one could know who you are. Hmm...” Banba paused and pondered what Rhianic said, “It has not been that far removed since the days of Arthur and Mordred. There could still be many who remember them.”

“Yeah, but what if it was Mab?”

“I did not sense her presence. She could not move about without my knowing,” Banba said with unwavering certainty, “worry no more about this tonight, for tomorrow we go to the Lady of the Lake.”

Rhianic ordered an ale and tried to relax, but the nagging image of the old woman haunted him. “Who could it be? Maybe it was Merlin,” he thought.

“Rhianic,” Banba said sternly, “let it go for now. Have faith in my assurances.”

“Sorry, it’s just that...”

“Rhianic!” Banba’s voice grew louder and more rigid with every spoken syllable.

“Alright, alright. Consider it forgotten.”

Rhianic forced the old crone’s image from his mind. As he sat there sipping his ale and listing to the Bard sing of ancient tales and heroic deeds, he noticed a rather sad looking gentleman sitting at the table next to him. This person seemed a weary soul. He just sat there staring at his untouched tankard of ale. Every so often a tear would gently flow down his sturdy, but weathered cheek. He was certainly not someone who you would expect to see crying in the middle of a Bardic sing-a-long.

“Pardon me stranger, but with all the ribald behavior about, it seems rather odd for you to be shedding tears over sour ale,” Rhianic stated lightheartedly, hoping not to sound to much like a hypocrite, considering the brooding fit that he had just recovered from.

“Leave me alone,” the man barked back, “I am not inclined to share my problems with strangers.”

“Sorry friend, I thought maybe...”

“No,” the man paused, “it is I who should be sorry stranger. I should not be so harsh.”

“What is your name?” Rhianic asked.

“Aldrien, good sir. My name is Aldrien.”

“So Aldrien, what is of such a grave concern that a strong man, such as yourself, be so melancholy? Surely it couldn’t be the weather.”

“No friend. It is the fact that my family and I will lose our farm and maybe our freedom,” Aldrien swallowed hard and fought back the tears, “the taxes are due tomorrow and I have not the coin to pay.”

“What King would do such things to his people?” Rhianic asked.

“King Pedwar is a good man, but some of his Lords are not. The one who holds my lands is not a kind soul. He is a Saxon, of noble blood. If only...”

“If only what?”

“If only I was blessed by the spirits.”

Rhianic quizzed Aldrien further, “what do you mean?”

“I had a neighbor who was a fisherman. One day while he was working the harbor, he had his sons tilling the fields. They dug up a pot of gold, Roman gold stolen by fairies years before and buried there. They bought safe passage to America and have never been back since. If only such blessings would fall upon me. Only if Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table were still here. All would be well then.”

His words spoke with honesty and touched Rhianic. He had thought many times before, of what it would have been like if Arthur had never been killed in battle and Mordred had never been corrupted by Mab. Rhianic would have been a prince to these people. He would have been a benevolent ruler and a leader of men. But all that was stolen from him.

Rhianic reached down into his ornately carved leather pouch and pulled out a smaller pouch wrapped in twine and handed it to Aldrien.

“Here, take this home with you, but do not open it till you get there. Make sure that your wife and children are there when you open it.”

“What is it friend?”

“It is magic, now go, before it fades away.”

Aldrien, sensing that this was no trick, quickly rushed out of the inn.

Banba looked at Rhianic and smiled.

“What did you say to him?” she asked.

“Nothing, nothing at all. Let’s just say that I did my one good deed for the year.”

Banba shook her head at Rhianic's vain attempt to cover up his sensitivity with half-wit bravado.

"You are a good soul Rhianic Pendragon. Never forget that."

In the pounding rain Aldrien suddenly stopped. In the flashes of lightening his form changed from that of a middle-aged fisherman to that of an old woman, the old woman who had spoken to Rhianic earlier in the evening. As she looked around she saw a poor family huddled under the overhang of the blacksmith's wood shed. She could tell that they were refugees from the Scot, Angle and Pict wars occurring in the Northlands over the remnant kingdom of Cumbria.

"You there, take this and say a blessing for the Children of Lyr." She tossed them the pouch and then seemingly disappeared into thin air.

The family looked at each other in confusion. The father picked up the pouch and looked at it.

"What is it Papa?" his youngest daughter asked.

"I don't know," he said as he undid the twine and pulled open the pouch.

He shook it once and nothing came out. The family looked at each other in bewilderment. The father then shook the pouch a second time, and this time gold and silver coins came pouring out. Enough to make them rich beyond their wildest dreams.

The family then did as the old woman had asked of them. They walked to the village well and threw a coin into the waters as a votive offering to Lyr.

*Rhianic was awakened from a rather sensual dream by the sudden shriek of a cockcrow. It had stopped raining and the sun was barely peaking though the clouds.*

*"Awaken Rhianic, we must be going soon. I want us to be on the Brambledowns by early afternoon," Banba said.*

*“I’m up, I’m up. No problem,” he said as he attempted to refresh himself with some water from the clay pitcher setting on a stand, next to the bed.*

*Soon they were on their way. The air was crisp and clear. As the mists rose from the nearby stream, the sun began to cover the land in a blanket of warmth. Rhianic and Banba both had a horseback breakfast consisting of bread, cheese and an apple. By high noon they had crossed the Brambledowns and were approaching Lake Saraide.*

*Rhianic and Banba stopped upon the hill overlooking the lake. There sat an ancient stone nemeton, moss-covered and unused.*

*“Rhianic, take this apple from the Isle of Vannin and place it on the stone as an offering to the Lady. Then you must continue on your own, down to the shore, for I will not breech her sanctuary out of respect. I gave my word.”*

*Rhianic did as Banba said and placed the apple on the sacred stone. He remembered what was taught by the sages, that if you gave an apple from the Isle of Vannin, as an offering to the gods, that it would nourish them for a hundred years.*

*“To your health and longevity, oh Great Lady,” he said quietly.*

*He then proceeded, on foot, down to the lakeshore. For as long as he could remember, he had dreamt of this day. He had waited for so long to meet the Lady of the Lake. Many thoughts raced through his mind. What would he say to Nimue after all these years? He soon would know the answer.*

*Rhianic descended along the narrow, stony path to the water’s edge. The lake was crystal clear and a cold wind rose off its mirrored surface. Rhianic looked back for Banba, but she was nowhere to be seen. He stood there in silence. He could not help but let his imagination wander back to the days of his grandfather. To the glorious days of Camelot, when Excalibur, held by his grandfather’s hand, swayed this land.*

*“Nimue, I, Rhianic Pendragon, son of Mordred, grandson of Arthur, wish to speak to you. Rise from your watery abyss so that my eyes might gaze upon you for the first time.”*

*A single leaf fell from a gnarled, old oak that grew along the water’s edge. It danced in the wind, as if cajoled by unseen hands, then fell into the still tarn below. Gentle ripples, the visible echoes of a dryad’s whisper, then formed along the water’s surface. They gathered force and soon a bubbling whirlpool rose from the depths of the living waters.*

*Soon came the Lady of the Lake. Enshrouded in mists, she appeared before Rhianic. Her hair was of the sun. It sparkled an otherworldly, golden hue and her eyes were of the most brilliant shade of jade. Around her neck she wore a gold dolphin torc, a symbol of her heritage as a water deity.*

*“Son of Mordred, where have you kept yourself all these years? Why have you not come to me before?”*

*“I have been away. I was only three when Arthur and Mordred perished at Camlann. Soon after, I was spirited away across the nine waves to the Isle of Apples. In the lush groves of Dagda I was raised and educated by Banba. Now I return to Camelot, not to claim what is rightfully mine, but to restore my family’s honor.”*

*“You come before me with a heart filled with vengeance, though it has been tempered by wisdom and calculation. Beside you walks a goddess whose birth was recorded in the remotest of days. Far before that of even my own.”*

*“Banba walks with me. She is my guiding beacon and my focal. Without her I am nothing.”*

*“So tell me Pendragon, what is it that you seek?”*

*“I come to you, Great Lady, on this day, to ask for Excalibur, the sword of kings. For only through it shall budding vengeance see fruition.”*

*Nimue smiled at Rhianic, “You are a man of good resolve, of this I know. For I was the old woman who you met at the stables and it was I who was the poor farmer that you helped at the tavern.”*

*“That was you?” Rhianic bellowed in shock.*

*“Yes. I knew you were coming and I knew you would ask for the sacred sword. I had to determine your worth beforehand.”*

*“So, does that mean you will give Excalibur to me, oh Great Lady?”*

*“You have proven your virtue, now you must prove to me your courage. Before I give to you the sword of kings, you must bring to me a single scale from the red dragon of the Cymry.”*

*Rhianic’s eyes grew big and he swallowed hard, “The red dragon of the Cymry, the great beast of the Blackhand Mountains? Would that not be suicide?”*

*“You know your task, if you wish for Excalibur, then fulfill the quest.”*

*As quickly as Nimue came, she disappeared, and the lake once more grew silent. Rhianic was in disbelief. He had never seen a dragon before, let alone fought one. He was very skilled with the sword against men, but a dragon? This worried him greatly.*

*As Rhianic walked back to his horse, he noticed that the apple was indeed gone from the nemeton. In the fertile fields below Banba waited with the horses. She could tell by the look on Rhianic’s face that he was upset.*

*“I see that you are without Excalibur.”*

*“I cannot believe what she asked me to do. I’ve got to go and kill a dragon first before she gives me the sword.”*

*“Kill a dragon? What exactly did she say and which dragon?”*

*“She said that I proved my worth...that’s another thing. She was the old woman and that poor farmer at the inn. I can’t believe...”*

*“What did she say about the dragon, Rhianic, the dragon?” Banba said sternly in an attempt to cease Rhianic’s meandering.*

*“Sorry, I am a bit excited.” He took a deep breath and calmed down, “She said that I must go on a quest, to retrieve for her, a single scale from the red dragon of the Cymry.”*

*“I thought she might have you do such a thing. Though I was not anticipating an excursion of this nature,” Banba said as she rummaged around in a leather pouch looking for something, “just as you went to her without me at your side, so to must you go to the dragon alone. But I can give you something that will aid you.”*

*“What is that Banba?”*

*She handed Rhianic a small glass vial filled with a vibrant green liquid, “This magical potion is an elixir of invincibility, made from the falling leaves of the tree of life. For one sunrise and sunset nothing of the mortal world can harm you. But use it only if you must.”*

*“Thank you Banba. Thank you so much.”*

*“Go now, you haven’t much time before the eve of Samhain. Cross the inlet of the Kells and then head north to the Blackhand Mountains, there resides the dragon. I will wait for you back at the village. You have my blessings.”*

*Banba turned and rode away. Rhianic, feeling the urgency in her words, made haste for the coast.*

Two days ride hence, he caught a fisher boat to the southern Celtic kingdom of Glamorgan. It was evening when he sat sail. The mists shrouded everything in a veil of white.

“You are lucky my friend,” said the fisherman, “King Cor is a benevolent man. There should be no problem dropping you off near the village of Cern. We had heard tales of him and the king of Dyfed going to war, but that has not been verified.”

The man’s words fell on deaf years. Rhianic was too preoccupied with the thoughts of the coming days ahead. As he stared out through the mists, the sound of the water gently

lapping on the side of the skiff made him sleepy. It was at this time, the twilight, that magic can sometimes occur.

As Rhianic sat there he began to hear the sound of oars, many oars in the water. Suddenly, before him a large vessel, carrying many men broke through the fog. It was a Roman ship, not unlike the kind Caesar sailed in to Britannia many, many years before. He could hear the men speaking in Latin, he could see the fires of their torches.

“Sweet Brighid, look out. We are going to be overrun,” Rhianic shouted.

He stood up in the boat and drawled his sword from its sheath. The fisherman and his son looked in desperation but saw nothing. As quick as it appeared, it vanished.

“A Fata Morganna,” Rhianic thought, “this is an ill omen indeed.”

He turned to the fisherman, “Uh sorry. I thought I saw something in the mists.”

He said little else the rest of the way across the water.

Once he landed in Cern, he paid the man in silver and then went about his way. At a distance he could see the rugged black peaks of the mountains. It would not be that far of a journey.

He walked for a day and a half when he reached the foot of the mountains. It was there that he came upon an old man working a garden, near a quaint cabin. Before he had a chance to introduce himself, the old man sprang up and greeted him in a tongue unfamiliar to Rhianic.

“I’m sorry, but I do not understand you.”

“Damn,” said the old man, “I was hoping this time you would be the one.”

“The one what?” Rhianic asked.

“The one who could answer my question, that’s what.”

“I speak seven languages,” Rhianic said with pride, “but I do not know the one you spoke just now.”

“Good. Then you are not of the fairy and therefore not here to harm me.”

“Who are you?” Rhianic asked.

“I, my boy, am Taliesin, the shining brow. And now that you know my name you must come and break bread with me.”

“Well, I really should be going.”

“Nonsense. You must eat first,” Taliesin said as he motioned for Rhianic to follow, “where was it, did you say, you were going to in such a hurry?”

“I did not say. But if you must know I am going to have a word with the red dragon who lives in these very mountains.”

“Ha, why would you do such a thing? Are you mad?” he asked.

“No. It is a quest that I am on.”

“A quest did you say? Well, all quests must start on a full stomach.”

Rhianic followed Taliesin into his cottage. The smell of stew filled the air as a roaring fire heated an iron kettle. Above the fireplace a knotted and cracked shield was mounted. A dried rowan leaf and mistletoe wreath hung above the window. Several walking staffs sat perched along the far wall and a corner table was brimming with small clay bottles and wooden bowls. Rhianic sat down as Taliesin began to slice the freshly baked bread.

“So, it is the red dragon that you come here for. Hmm...” Taliesin thought for a moment, “this must be an important quest that you are on is it not?”

“Yes. Yes it is. One of the most important...”

Rhianic was abruptly interrupted as Taliesin screamed and threw a wooden bowl full of nuts and berries at the open window.

“Damn fairies. Take that you buggers. You will never take me alive, do you hear, never!”

Rhianic quickly realized that his hospitable acquaintance was slightly left-of-center. He stood up cautiously.

“Sorry, Taliesin, but I best be going now. I haven’t much time.”

“The red dragon you say. Are you going to kill it and steal all of its gold?”

“Oh, I certainly hope I don’t have to kill it. I have heard that it can be a reasonable beast upon occasion. I would rather just reason with it and ask it for a scale.”

“A scale? What in Mab’s festering bosom do you want a scale for?” Taliesin leaned in and whispered, “Is it an ingredient for a magic potion?”

“No, no. Nothing like that,” Rhianic replied, not sure if he should tell the old man the whole story.

“Well, take my word for it. If you show no violence toward the dragon and ask politely, he just might barter with you. See that staff over there, the one with the silver horn mounted on it?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“That is an ancient staff of the Druids. It possesses the power of divination. I traded the dragon a jug of swamp root ale for that staff. He seems partial to spirit water.”

Rhianic pondered this for a moment, “I thank you for the advice Taliesin. I will do as you say, but I best be going now.”

“Yes, I suppose you should. You never know when the fairies will attack next. Here take this bread with you so you will not grow hungry on your journey.”

As Rhianic headed up the narrow mountain path he could hear the crashing of pots and the raving shouts of Taliesin in the distance.

“He is a mad one indeed,” he thought.

*It was not long until he reached the cave where the dragon was supposed to live. But instead of coming face to face with a roaring beast of mythic proportions, the eerie echo of howling winds was all that could be heard. Its otherworldly, banshee-like wail caused goosebumps to rise and filled the cavern with what only could be described as the ghostly laments of the dead. It was almost deafening. As Rhianic crossed over an inner natural archway the winds suddenly ceased.*

*“Well, what do we have here?” said a booming voice from the shadows, “who is this that dares enter my abode?”*

*Rhianic stopped where he stood, “I-I seek the mighty red dragon of the C-Cymry.”*

*“You have found him boy. Prepare to do battle.”*

*“Wait, wait. I didn’t come here to fight you. I came here to barter with you.”*

*“Barter with me?” the dragon asked as he lowered his enormous red-scaled head down to Rhianic’s level, “hmm... what is it that you desire and what do you have that I may want?”*

*“I have a potion of indestructibility, stirred by Banba herself, and I also have an apple from the Isle of Apples, birthplace of Manannan Mac Lir. Both of these I would trade to you for one scale from your great wings, oh lord.”*

*“You what?” the dragon looked at Rhianic in amazement.*

*“Yes, a scale. I am on a great quest and I must have one of your scales or all, I am afraid, is lost.”*

*“Well then, we cannot have that. Let me see these items.”*

*Rhianic nervously handed the bottle and the apple over to the dragon.*

*“You tell the truth. Both are what you say they are. In all my years I never had anyone ask for a scale.”*

*The dragon folded in a wing and pulled off one of his scales and handed it to Rhianic.*

*“Here you go. But you best be going before I change my mind.”*

*Rhianic took the scale and ran out of the cave. He ran down the mountain path and did not look back.*

*“Fare-thee-well Pendragon. May your true quest be fulfilled,” the dragon said as he watched Rhianic disappear down the path. He then changed into his human guise, that of the bard Taliesin, “We all wish you well on your journey. May the Tylwyth Teg protect you as you sleep.”*

Rhianic's journey back to the village of Nudd was an uneventful one. Except for the occasional pixie that would perch in his hair, nothing else happened. Upon his arrival he sought out Banba who, prophetically enough, was waiting at the town's edge with the horses.

“You don't waste any time do you?” Rhianic commented.

“It is two days until Samhain's eve. You would either make it back at this hour, or our window of opportunity would vanish. Did you get the dragon's scale?”

“Yes. I have it right here.”

“Did you use the potion that I gave you?”

“Uh, yes. You could say that,” he muttered as he quickly changed the subject, “I do hope this time she gives me the sword.”

As they both rode along, Rhianic could not help but ask Banba a question that had been on his mind since this journey began.

“Why don't you use your magical powers here? I mean, after all, you are a goddess of much dominion.”

“It is because of respect that I do not do so. These lands are not my lands and these people worship various deities. Some still pray to the Old Ones, while others worship the Roman gods, including the Christian sun deity and the Persian

Mithra. It is not my place to supersede them here, at this time. For the sky wheel has just turned once more and my second dawn is many epochs away from this moment in time. But you needn't concern yourself with such things. Focus only on your tasks at hand."

"Sorry Banba. I was just curious," Rhianic said apologetically.

Soon the duo, once again, reached the summit overlooking the sacred lake. Rhianic dismounted and placed another apple on the nemeton. He approached the lake slowly, and looked for signs of the Lady. He laid the dragon scale at the water's edge and said the words of summoning.

Soon the waters stirred. A whirlpool of simmering bubbles rose to the surface and through the waves the glint of a sword appeared. It was Excalibur.

"You have proved your courage, Rhianic Pendragon. The sword of kings is yours."

As it breached the surface, the names of all the kings who held it previously, could be seen inscribed on the blade. Rhianic waited until the whole of it was out of the water, then he reached down and took the sword slowly from her hands. As he did so, he heard the words, 'for Albion' spoken softly upon the wind.

A charge of static energy immersed him. He felt more alive now than ever before. He truly knew for the first time, that this was his destiny.

*Two days passed and Samhain had finally arrived. Magic was in the air. Banba was radiant. This was her day after all. All the gods were in their prime on this, the most sacred of evenings. It was also the time that they became the most vulnerable. A duality not lost on Rhianic.*

*He traveled with Banba to the most ancient and sacred of standing stones. A henge where on this eve, one could enter and call upon the Queen of Fairies, Mab, and she would come.*

*“Soon Rhianic, Mab’s hour of reckoning will come. Do not let her sweet tongue tempt you. For she will try to weave a spell around you, a spell most mortals cannot resist. You must at all costs.”*

*“Fear not. I am not my father. I will not fall for her lies.”*

*“Remember, use your mind. Wait for her to lower her guard and then strike with Excalibur. It will be your only chance.”*

*Banba then placed her hand on Excalibur and uttered a few sacred words. Before Rhianic’s eyes the sword turned into an old walking stick.*

*“This will keep Mab from seeing the blade. When you are ready to strike, the sword will reappear.”*

*Banba vanished. A stiff wind began to blow in from the north. Rhianic felt that the time was right. He took a deep breath. As his body shivered with anticipation, he stepped into the stone circle.*

*Inside the circle’s confines no wind was blowing. All was silent.*

*“Queen of...” Rhianic stopped as the echo of his words almost knocked him down. The stones magnified the sound of his voice ten-fold.*

*“Queen of Fairies, mother of Maeve, I call upon you, on this, the most sacred of nights,” he said softly.*

*It was not long before Mab appeared. She was quite beautiful. She was dressed in regal purple and black robes and her pale, milky skin seemed to glow with magic. One could get lost in her flowing, raven-hued hair. She was the essence of magic. Rhianic tried not to be taken off guard by her appearance, but this was going to be harder than he had thought.*

*“Who is this stranger that stands before me?” she asked.*

*As she spoke, the scenery around Rhianic changed slightly. Though he still could see the now fading outline of the stone circle, he realized that he had crossed over into her world. A*

*tripod with a hanging cauldron sat over an open fire. A raven was now perched on her shoulder and it looked at him warily.*

*“You are Mab, the Queen of Fairies?”*

*“Yes, mortal I am. Come take a sip of broth from my cauldron. It will do you good.”*

*“No thank you. I am not hungry.”*

*“What is it that you come for? Is it wealth? Mortals are always asking for wealth. For a price, a hoard of gold coin can be found in your fields come Spring,” she paused for a moment, “you seem to be familiar to me somehow. Something about you...”*

*Rhianic wasted no more time. He struck with abandonment.*

*“For Camelot, for Mordred, for Arthur,” Rhianic shouted.*

*The walking staff swiftly changed into Excalibur as the blade found its mark. For an instant Mab gained the look of recognition, but it was too late. With one skillful blow Rhianic had taken her head.*

*Energies began to swirl about as the cauldron flame went out. The earth below him shook violently. He grabbed her severed head by the hair and kicked over the cauldron for good measure. He then stepped though the threshold back into the mortal world. There, Banba greeted him.*

*“It is over, it is finally over,” Rhianic said as tears of joy and relief welled in his eyes.*

*“Yes, Rhianic, it is finally over,” Banba said as she embraced him.*

*Rhianic had fulfilled his destiny and Camelot was avenged.*

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## **Moon Warrior**

Kate Hill

The scent of fear clung to the hot summer air, mingling with the pungent aroma of blood and freshly turned earth which scattered beneath the pack's racing paws. The moose fled from the trees and into a field, a sleek gray wolf at its flanks while three others formed a deadly circle of lashing teeth and clutching paws. Leaping onto the moose's back, the gray's teeth bit deep through the flat fur and sinew as the moose staggered to its knees.

Caleb felt the surge of hot blood over his tongue and down his throat, a thrill of power combined with clutching hunger causing a tremor to momentarily raise the coarse fur on his back. He clung tightly to the moose until it lay in a lifeless heap beneath his panting body, then stepped back, the grass flattening beneath his feet as he shifted effortlessly into man form, blood and sweat glinting off his muscled body in the moonlight.

The other three followed his change. Two males, using deft human hands, began cleaning the animal to carry back to their village while the female approached Caleb and licked the blood from his lips.

"Three by yourself in one night," she said. "I'm impressed."

"Nice to know I can still impress you, my love."

She shrugged, her eyes glistening.

"Only until I find another handsome Alpha."

Growling, his eyes narrowed as his teeth lengthened against his lips. He clutched her shoulders and spun her to face him. "There is no other for you, Tia."

She locked her arms around his neck and laughed.

“Are you going to help us or mate right here in the middle of the wood?” Mette, a tall, black haired male with shifty blue eyes, couldn’t disguise the contempt in his voice.

“I didn’t just hear that.” Caleb’s teeth extended to a more wolfish length.

Mette glared into his leader’s face with uncharacteristic persistence for five uneasy seconds before he lowered his eyes in deference to Caleb. The violent clenching of Mette’s teeth and flexing of fingers belied his agitation.

Caleb added, “If you have a problem, Mette, we can rectify it simply.”

Tia and the other wolf watched anxiously, the scent of Caleb and Mette’s rivalry heavy on the air.

“No problem.” Mette squatted beside the moose. “Let’s get this meat back home.”

While Mette and the second male hauled the moose, Tia and Caleb lingered behind to swim in the cascade a short distance from the clearing. The water ran down from the mountains and was cold in spite of the summer heat. Caleb thought there was nothing better than frolicking with his wife after the excitement of a hunt. As they swam, he gazed proudly at her sculpted muscles and dark beauty, noting that the time she had spent living among humans had given her a gentle, tempered quality which balanced her wild nature and made her more exciting to him than the females who had spent their lives in the forest.

Growling playfully, he dove beneath the water and tugged her into his arms. She met his ardor with matching intensity, yet as they surfaced, he noticed uncertainty in her eyes.

“Mette worries me,” she confided.

“He’s strong, but I’m stronger. He lost one challenge to me and won’t be stupid enough to try a second time.”

“That’s exactly what concerns me. Mette isn’t stupid.”

Caleb tilted his head in question.

“You shouldn’t have let him rejoin the pack after he fought you.” Tia slipped from his arms and waded to shore.

Caleb followed. “What about compassion?”

She glanced over her shoulder, lifting a slender eyebrow.

“Don’t look so surprised, Tia. You’ve spent more time among humans than I have, and we both know that though they can be even more savage than we are, they also understand mercy.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.” She tossed her hands in the air. “You know that the pack values strength above all else, especially regarding their leaders. You told me that when you brought me here.” She placed her hand to his chest. “Caleb, I know you’re trying to guide us beyond the old ways. The pack respects your strength, your courage, and even your compassion, but they still can’t understand why you allowed Mette to return. He wants leadership, and I don’t trust the methods he’ll use to get it.”

“There’s only one way to get it, and that’s through me. I’ve made it clear that if we fight again, I’ll kill him.”

“If you’re able,” she murmured.

Her words lacerated him like the swipe of a grizzly’s paw. “You doubt me?”

“I doubt his integrity, and so do you.”

“I could banish him, but how would that look? If we don’t set an example of sincerity and stability, then how can we expect the others to do the same? Leadership isn’t only about fighting and hunting. It’s about building trust and creating a productive society. In our great grandfathers’ time, we slaughtered humans just for the pleasure of it. Look how far we’ve come.”

“Do you ever get urge anymore? To taste human blood?”

“Sometimes.”

“So do I,” she whispered against his lips.

Her hand turned to a claw which sensuously scored his chest, drawing thin streams of blood and causing him to shiver with passion.

“We have to get back,” he said. “The feast won’t start without us.”

“Duty now, but later is for us.”

Together they shifted to wolf form and bounded through the wood to their village, located halfway up the forest’s tallest mountain. Though the pack had claimed a square mile to scatter rustic living cabins, everyone gathered at the village square for feasts and meetings. A vast cave was lit with torches, and adults lounged around long wooden tables drinking liquor made by a family who had done so for generations. Children played tag and hide-and-seek in the smaller adjoining caves as they practiced shifting shape.

Outside, a fire already burned, the meat from the day’s hunt resting beside it, raw, bloody, and dark red in the light of the flames. There were several deer, many rabbits, and the three moose Caleb had killed.

Caleb noticed Mette standing a short distance from the fire, his jewel-like eyes glistening with jealousy as he stared at the moose, his teeth grinding.

A group of children yipped gleefully upon seeing their leaders, as they knew the feast could finally begin.

“I hope the meat hasn’t lost its flavor by now,” Mette commented to the four wolves by the fire.

They laughed, taking his comment as a joke.

“Mette, take the first watch down by the lake,” Caleb ordered as he and Tia took their place amidst the pack who had left the cave to gather around them.

Mette stammered, “But I just came from the hunt...”

Caleb growled deep in his chest, a scarcely audible sound, but Mette heard it and knew better than to argue. Traditionally, the members of the hunt were honored during the feast and were exempt from their nightly duties.

Caleb knew his command humiliated Mette, but the wolf had been too flippant lately. In spite of Caleb's earlier arguments with Tia, he knew that she was right. The pack would only listen to him provide he kept their respect, and at times it meant indulging his primitive instincts.

Mette snarled, as he leapt over the fire, the flames licking his wolf belly, and disappeared into the darkness.

Caleb lifted his face to the moon which glowed full and pale through the cluster of tree branches. He howled, the shrill sound echoing across miles of forest. Tia joined him, and, after her, the rest of the pack. They howled long and loud as they devoured the fresh meet in the warmth of the ever-rising flames.

Long before the feasting ended, when the children were still licked the last warm, crimson droplets from shards of bone and men and women danced to the rhythm of wooden flutes and drums, Caleb and Tia slipped through the trees and back to the lake. They dove, naked, beneath the calm, black water and surfaced locked in a passionate embrace.

Caleb felt the sharpness of her teeth against his lips and the sting of her nails which raked him from shoulder to waist. Strength, freedom, and raw power filled him. The hunt, the leadership of his pack, and the love of his wife made him soar higher than a bird of prey. He tried to repress his passionate emotions since he had seen many leaders and warriors, both shapeshifter and human, destroyed by their own arrogance, but at certain moments, particularly when alone with his mate, he allowed himself to indulge.

He tasted her blood and her skin. He howled to the sky of his love for her and listened as her own wolfish voice joined his. They shrieked until the forest fell silent except for their rapturous cries of dominance.

When they tired of frolicking in the lake, they walked down the pathway which led to the open fields close to the manmade roads.

Before they even saw the openness of the wide tar highways or the occasional glint of headlights from a car

passing through the empty country road, Caleb caught the scent of humankind and the residue of oil and gasoline from the cars and trucks. It seemed that with each passing year the signs of man were moving deeper into the wood, closer to the shapeshifters. He and Tia had their own personal experiences with the human world. During one of their first hunts, when they had been little more than children, they had ventured too close to the parts of the forest where men hunted. Caleb's first true wound had been from a bullet, and Tia had been taken, in her girl form, to be raised by humans.

When the rest of the pack had given up on finding Tia, Caleb had become only more determined to bring her back. He'd left his family to make his way in the world of man and had found survival even more difficult than among his own kind. Still, he'd mastered their ways and even became quite wealthy through several business ventures. At times he'd considered remaining in the human world, but always the forest summoned him and the moon led him back to the hunt.

When he'd finally found Tia, she had nearly forgotten her childhood, but the shapeshifter blood was strong in her. Like Caleb, her soul belonged to the pack.

"I'd almost forgotten how terrible trains smell." Tia wrinkled her nose as they approached the tracks which ran through the field beside the road. "What are we doing here, Caleb?"

"Listen," he whispered as the wind dusted tendrils of hair across his cheek.

Tia stood beside still beside him, her shoulder brushing his as they closed their eyes.

Though it was still miles away, the rumble of the train vibrated in their sensitive ears.

"We should go before they see us," Tia murmured as the train's lights glinted like pinpoints in the distance.

"Hide in the trees until I come back," Caleb told her.

"Caleb, this is silly. You told me you'd stop doing that."

“Just once more.” He glanced at her, feeling almost puppyish excitement.

She smiled in spite of her apparent concern. “What if someone notices you?”

“Then there’ll be an article in the tabloids about another Bigfoot sighting,” Caleb called over his shoulder, his voice deepening as he shifted into wolf form and leapt across the field toward the slick silver train as it flew on the rails.

Caleb’s speed increased until his paws scarcely touched the ground. He flattened his ears against his head as the shriek of the wind became louder than the sound of the train. He felt as if he could run forever, but the train was nearing a bend and Tia was waiting for him. Blood pounded through his body, and he felt charged with excitement as he raced closer to the train, so close that he could feel the steel against his fur. He edged nearer to the front of the train, forcing his speed to its limit, wondering for a brief moment if he could fulfill the task he’d set for himself or be smashed to pieces by the rushing mass of man-molded steel.

Without taking another moment to think lest he lose his nerve, he bounded ahead of the train and leapt across the tracks directly in front of the speeding engine.

He gradually slowed to a trot as Tia met him halfway across the field. In spite of the furious set of her jaw, he noticed fascination in her eyes.

“That was dumb,” she snapped. “What if you get hit one of these days? Then where will that leave the pack? I’ll tell you where it will leave us, with Mette in the lead.”

“That’s just my point, Tia.” He hugged her to his perspiring chest. “If I don’t stay sharp, Mette might get the idea that he can challenge me again.”

“Just don’t go making it easy for him, like having your legs run off by a train.”

“It’s nice to know the only reason you’re concerned with my safety is so Mette won’t take leadership.”

She cast him a teasing look. “Like I said before, one Alpha’s as good as another.”

She bolted into the trees as he chased her, his teeth gnashing playfully at her heels.

Two days later, Caleb and Tia were training with Mette and a group of young wolves in a clearing which the pack used for practice.

Tia, assuming the role of the prey, ran and dodged the surging mass of furry bodies, clicking teeth, and swiping paws while Mette and Caleb guided the more inexperienced hunters through the chase.

Though Caleb’s attention was focused on his trainees, he couldn’t help admiring Tia as she raced about the field, her long, powerful limbs easily avoiding the hunters and her dark coat gleaming in the sunlight. He remembered a time, not so long ago, that they were youths preparing for their first hunt. She’d been a child then, clumsy with puppy plumpness, but with a spirit which foretold of the sleek, powerful huntress she would become.

He nearly smiled as she glided by two wolves who crashed into one another and fell onto their rumps, heads reeling with dizziness.

“Silvan, work with the group,” Caleb shouted to a lanky, overly ambitious pup. “You’re not going to catch her on your own. Mette’s heading her off; you cover her rear.”

Mette’s teeth snapped close to Tia’s throat in a mock finish to the chase.

Tia batted his nose with her paw, and he sat on his haunches, glaring.

“Always work with the rest of the pack,” Caleb repeated as the group gathered in a loose circle. “It saves time and is less risky.”

“But I’ve seen you, Mette, and Tia take down prey alone,” Silvan glanced down at his paws.

“We’re more experienced. You can hunt on own whenever you want to challenge yourself, but right now we’re concerned with developing your skill within the group. That’s how we survive. Me or Mette bringing in a single animal alone is not nearly as important as all the food gathered by the entire pack.”

“Unless it’s three moose in one night,” Mette hissed under his breath.

“No one’s ever done that before.” Silvan stared at Caleb with awed eyes. “Everyone’s still taking about it.”

Mette yawned loudly. “If you’ll excuse me, I have duties to attend to.”

“Let’s go practice,” Silvan turned to the other young wolves. “I know where there’s a ton of rabbits.”

“Be careful,” Tia called as the pups bounded into the trees. She sighed, falling into step beside Caleb as they headed toward the village square. “I always worry that they’ll find bear and annoy it. They could loose an ear or an eye.”

Caleb smiled. “I wouldn’t worry. They’re making so much noise any animal within miles of them would disappear.” He paused, tilting his head thoughtfully. “We’ll have to work on that.”

Caleb parted with Tia just before the village square. It was his habit to spend a couple of hours each day searching for new paths and better hunting grounds. He used the time to rest his mind from the duties of leading the pack and insuring their relative peace with humankind. He’d spent enough time among humans to know how similar and how altogether different they were from shapeshifters. Both were intelligent, violent, and loving, but humankind sought to destroy each other through technological advancement while shapeshifters preferred more primitive methods. They existed on instinct alone, and though instinct was necessary, change was also required for survival.

Caleb knew they were greatly outnumbered by men, and the only two ways for shapeshifters to survive would be either to separate themselves from men or infiltrate their society. If tempered, he knew his people would eventually choose the latter, however he might not see such a great change in his lifetime. It was still a struggle to keep certain members of his pack from feeding off human flesh. Like a human hunter mounting the head of a buck with great antlers, snagging the hide of a man was a tremendous prize for a shapeshifter.

Caleb paused beside the thick trunk of a maple tree and forced such thoughts to a hidden corner of his mind. He was becoming obsessed with the prospect of peace between his kind and man. Tia had so often warned him that change was never sudden.

Lifting his chin slightly as he caught the scent of humanity on the wind, he realized he'd already covered more than half the distance between his village and the nearest human town. He often searched the trails where they hunted so that he would know when to move the pack further into the wood. He also destroyed the illegal steel traps which were still hidden in the undergrowth. Such traps were harmful to everyone, and it gave him some hope that humans had outlawed them. Still, he'd seen carcasses of too many animals who died long, agonizing deaths as well as some of his own kind scarred for life from the traps' unyielding jaws.

As he walked and the smell of men became stronger, he recognized the scent and voices of cubs from his own pack. The humans reeked of excitement, the cubs of fear.

Caleb shifted into wolf form as soon as the first shot broke the stillness of the morning. As he raced toward the cubs, he was agitated by memories of a fiery gunshot wound and of Tia being dragged away. They'd been cubs then, like the ones whose wailing voices echoed through the wood.

He noticed Silvan racing blindly toward him, the pale gray fur of his coat ruffled with terror. The cub was so overcome by fear that Caleb had to shake him by the back of the neck.

“Where are the others?” Caleb demanded.

“Behind me. We have to run. They’ve got guns and...”

“Keep quiet and follow me.” Caleb bounded over rocks and fallen trees until he caught all three cubs. The human scent was almost overpowering, and he could hear the high-pitched, muffled voices approaching.

Caleb led the cubs to the brook where their trail would be hidden.

“Keep traveling north and you’ll reach our land,” Caleb told them.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Silvan’s eyes widened helplessly.

“I’m going to lead the hunters back to the road. I don’t think they’ve followed us, but I can’t take the risk.”

“But...”

“You’ll be home before you know it,” Caleb told them. “I promise.”

As he raced back through the trees, he glanced behind him once to see the cubs scurrying upriver. Knowing they were safe, fear drained from Caleb as his keen sense of hearing and smell led him back to the hunters. With little effort, he guided the party toward the highway and left them wondering how such a large animal had disappeared so quickly.

By then Caleb was so far from shapeshifter territory that he would be forced to hurry to reach the village by nightfall. With the worry for the cubs and the excitement of the chase over, he trotted contentedly upland, thinking if he hurried, he and Tia might still have time for a swim before the evening meal.

Several feet ahead, its side velvety with moss, a particularly large tree had fallen. Caleb soared easily over it, but as he landed, excruciating pain blazed up his left rear leg. He howled in shock, spinning in a semi circle, his teeth snapping at the creature who’d bitten him. Instead of flesh and fur, his mouth found steel. His leg was locked in one of the traps he’d spent so many hours searching for. Blood splashed

from the wound, matting his fur as he clawed at the trap, tearing his own flesh deeper as he tried in vain to free himself.

As the wood darkened with the approaching dusk, he sat panting from his efforts to open the trap. His mouth and hands were nearly as bloody as his leg, and he willed himself not to panic. The hunters had long since retired from the wood and wouldn't hear him if he howled, but perhaps one of the pack would. If he didn't return by the time the moon reached its height, Tia would search for him. Even so, the pain was becoming unbearable, and the loss of blood was rapidly draining his strength.

Horrified by the vision of decaying bodies and fungus-covered bones he'd seen attached to traps, he howled until his throat ached and consciousness faded.

He came slowly to wakefulness, scarcely able to open his eyes. His entire body ached from struggling to free himself, his head throbbed as nausea almost overcame him. The agony in his trapped leg was indescribable, but beyond that, he became aware of another pain. A cougar, drawn by the scent of his blood and deceived by his stillness, had begun to gnaw at his leg.

Instinctively, Caleb turned and snapped his teeth at the cougar, but with his slowed reflexes, he only succeeded in nicking the cat's shoulder. It hissed, swiped his cheek, and leapt out of his reach.

For the next hour it watched Caleb with relentless green eyes, attacking him when he lapsed into unconsciousness and fleeing from his teeth and claws when he lashed out in self defense.

He thought of the fierceness of nature's law. Had he been at full strength, the cougar would have been dangling from his teeth like a piece of dead wood. The creature, sensing his weakness, was doing what nature had intended predators to do: she was killing off the weak and injured.

Caleb had often done the same to other creatures, and like the ones he'd hunted, he now fought back with the last of his strength, trying desperately to prolong the inevitable.

The cat's ears flattened against her head, and she exposed her thick incisors before leaping in an attack which never came.

Tia caught her in midair, her own teeth clamping the cougar's neck and crushing her spine. She flung the body aside, and the cougar's dead eyes stared like polished rocks as Tia half shifted, retaining the appearance of both wolf and woman, keeping the wolf's power and the mobility of human hands. With their combined strength, she and Caleb were able to free his mangled leg.

"I've been looking for you since Silvan and the others returned to the village with the story about the hunters," she said, trying to keep him lucid as she washed his leg with water from a nearby brook and began stitching it with a bag of supplies she'd brought from the village. She was certainly not a nurse of any kind, but had learned enough from the village healer to stop the bleeding. "I sensed something terrible happened to you."

"I knew you'd find me," he whispered, his voice hoarse from pain and howling. "This is my own fault. I should have been more careful."

"It's those damn traps," she snarled. "I'd love to rip the flesh off the man who put it there."

Under normal circumstances, her fierceness would have incited his passion, but he could scarcely comprehend their conversation and couldn't recall any of the details of the exhausting journey back to the village.

Once in their cabin, he collapsed on the bed while Tia sent for the healer. Caleb had shifted shape once during the journey, and the change had influenced his body's healing process, but the wounds from the cougar and the trap were still severe, and the loss of blood had taken its toll.

He lay still as Tia washed the blood still oozing from the claw marks on his cheek, and he lifted his hand to brush the hair from her eyes, his love for her stronger than ever.

Suddenly a furious howl sounded from the clearing behind their cabin. Not just any howl. It was a challenge for leadership of the pack.

“Mette,” Tia whispered, her eyes reflecting Caleb’s own apprehension. She spat. “The coward!”

Caleb drew a long breath and pushed himself to the edge of the bed.

“Surely you don’t intend to fight him?”

“I have to.”

“No.” Tia’s fingers clutched his shoulders. “Caleb, he’ll kill you.”

“To refuse his challenge is to sacrifice leadership. You know that, Tia.”

“I know he’s got all the courage of a half-starved fawn.” Her words dripped rage and disgust. “He isn’t strong enough to challenge you to a fair fight because he knows he’ll lose. He’s no leader, Caleb.”

Again Mette’s howl sounded from outside, louder this time.

Caleb knew Tia was right, but he also knew the law of the pack. When challenged, the leader must fight. The only way for a new leader to rise is through battle or appointment by another leader still in his prime. Though the latter was preferred by all parties involved, fights for leadership still occurred, but usually when both wolves were strong. There was no honor in winning over a weak adversary, but Mette only seemed to consider tradition when it suited him.

“Caleb, don’t do this,” Tia pleaded.

Grimly he pushed her aside and went to meet his challenge.

Having heard Mette’s howling, the entire pack had gathered around the clearing, their faces as tense as Tia’s as she followed behind Caleb. Caleb heard some muttering about the validity of the challenge, but he paid little attention as he focused on a fight he had no chance of winning.

Mette stood beneath the low hanging branch of a tree rooted beside the rocky edge of a rushing waterfall, his eyes furious, foam dripping from his jaws. He flew at Caleb who also shifted into wolf form. Their heads butted like rams, jarring both of them several feet backwards.

Caleb's rear leg collapsed under the pressure of landing, and he scarcely had time to defend himself against Mette's onslaught of teeth and claws.

No stranger to fighting, Caleb had seen the signs of a wolf who was on the verge of defeat, but it was the first time he felt that desperation himself. Seldom had he reached the end of his physical limits, but each of Mette's bites bled his strength until Caleb could scarcely raise his own paws to defend himself. Even the taste of Mette's blood on his tongue did nothing to inflame his passion for the fight.

He turned his head just before Mette's gory teeth slashed his jugular. Instead, the bite landed hard and deep above his shoulder. Flesh and fur tore off in Mette's jaws as Caleb summoned the last of his strength to hurl the other wolf against the trunk of a wizened oak.

Caleb was overwhelmed by the frantic desire to flee for his life while he had the chance, but pride forced him to leap at Mette in a final desperate attack.

Dazed from striking the tree, Mette was clumsy in his defense and missed the opportunity to slash his opponent's throat with his claws. He only managed to knock Caleb backwards onto the slippery rocks above the cascade. Caleb disappeared beneath the thick rush of water.

For a brief, horrific time, Caleb was aware of water slamming him against slippery rocks and filling his lungs with each painful breath. He thought briefly of Tia and the pack, left to defend themselves against Mette, then he lost consciousness as his temple dashed against the jagged branch of a tree overhanging the river.

“Caleb.”

*His name was whispered from a distance, or so he thought until the sting of a hand across his torn cheek forced him to reality.*

“Caleb!” Tia shouted, a desperate edge to her voice. “Don’t you die on me! Caleb!”

*He focused on her through half closed eyes, and she sighed with relief. Slowly, he became aware of his surroundings. It was evening, and he was lying by the muddy edge of the river. By the faint scent of gasoline, he guessed they were close to the highway. His entire body ached, and dizziness nearly overwhelmed him as he tried to move from where he lay with his head on Tia’s knees.*

“Where are we?” he murmured.

*“Not far from where you abandoned your car when we came to live with the pack a year ago. I’m going to get you to it. You need a hospital. Don’t argue. There’s no way we can get to the healer. Mette will kill us before...”*

*The fight flooded Caleb’s tired mind, and he covered his face with his hand. “Mette. He has the pack. What have I done?”*

“Caleb.” She shook him. “Listen to me. We have to get you treated. Then we can worry about Mette. I only hope the car didn’t get towed away.”

He shook his head. “It’s there. We left it on my land. My house isn’t far from here.”

“You have a house around here and you never told me?” she muttered, helping him to his feet. “They say the mate is always the last to know.”

“We rejoined the pack so spontaneously that I never got around to telling you. Then it just didn’t seem to matter anymore. I never thought we’d have to go back to the human world,” he explained, leaning heavily upon her since his wounded leg was practically useless.

*The car was just as they'd left it, parked behind a cluster of bushes off to the side of the main road. Their clothing, Caleb's dark pinstripe suit and Tia's slinky red dress, were still lying on the back seat, and Tia tore the dress's hemline, using the material to bind the worst of Caleb's injuries before they started the car.*

*He refused to be taken to the hospital but instead gave her directions to his home where he could recuperate without the hassle of questions which humans would undoubtedly ask.*

*"Caleb, you're hurt badly," she argued. "I'm not skilled enough to take care of you."*

*"Curtis is there," he whispered, his head drooping against the window, leaving a smear of blood on the glass.*

*"Curtis? That guy you told me about who works for you. Caleb? Stay with me."*

*He nodded. "He has many talents. The best of which is knowing when to keep silent."*

*Caleb scarcely remembered the drive to the house, but as they parked and struggled along the cobbled walkway to the familiar colonial style home, Caleb gradually became more aware of his surroundings.*

*Tia lifted her hand to knock, but the door opened before she had a chance to touch the smooth wood. A short, lanky man dressed in worn jeans and an open-neck denim shirt reached for Caleb's arm and helped Tia drag him onto a straight backed wooden chair in the hallway.*

*"What the hell happened this time?" the man asked with a slight Texas drawl.*

*"Curtis, I don't want to talk about it," Caleb muttered as the man immediately began examining his injuries, concentrating on his mangled leg.*

*"Help him to the couch. I can stitch him up there." Curtis ordered Tia.*

*"I guess you guys have done this before?" Tia didn't bother keeping the sarcasm from her voice.*

*“Curtis was an army doctor during Desert Storm.”*

*“Then what’s he doing working for you?”*

*“After the war, he wanted to give up anything which reminded him of fighting. When we met, both of us felt like we’d lost our souls, his in battle and mine when you were taken from the pack. We helped each other.” Caleb winced in pain as Tia helped him to lie down. “Damn, I’m getting blood all over my sofa.”*

*“Since when do you care about furniture?” Tia goaded, trying to keep him conscious.*

*“He’s the only guy I know who can eat raw meat in a white shirt and not spill a drop. I should know. I’ve done enough of his laundry,” Curtis remarked, arranging medical supplies on a tray by the couch.*

*Tia placed her hands on her hips. “I’d know a little something about his laundry.”*

*“I don’t believe this,” Caleb murmured. “I’m bleeding to death, and you’re both talking about my dirty socks.”*

*“Just trying to keep your mind occupied while I do this,” Curtis scrubbed Caleb’s torn leg.*

*Caleb stifled a groan as Curtis, aided by Tia, set to work swiftly. For a brief time he was aware of their words then exhaustion and blood loss overwhelmed him, and their voices grew muffled and distant as he slipped from consciousness.*

It dusk when Caleb woke. Black curtains swayed in the breeze which wafted through the half open window, and the quarter moon shone like a lemon slice suspended in the dark sky. Even before he moved, his entire body ached, but not nearly as much as his pride.

By pack law, he should be dead and his body left for scavengers to devour, yet because of the connection he’d made with the world of men, he was alive. And because of Tia.

“Caleb,” she called softly from the doorway. Her dark hair was braided over one shoulder and her sleek body was covered in one of his white cotton shirts which dangled to her knees. “You’ve had a fever since this morning. I was worried.”

She sat by the edge of the bed and reached out to brush the tangled hair from his forehead, but he turned away.

“It’s nothing. You spent too much of your life with human beings.”

Her eyes widened slightly at the viciousness of his tone. “I might have been raised among them, but I am a shapeshifter, Caleb, and I know that for one of us to have a fever for nearly a day is not good. It’s rare that we even get sick...”

“Will you stop talking about me for a minute,” he snapped, grasping her wrist to stop those gentle caresses which were far too comforting. “I’ve lost the pack, Tia.”

“It was an unfair fight...”

“Now Mette is in charge,” he went on, ignoring her. “What have I done?”

“Stop saying that!”

She shook him, her fingers biting through the bandages on his shoulders to the raw flesh beneath.

Tia continued, “You’re alive. That’s all that matters. When you’ve healed, we can take back what’s ours.”

“Don’t you get it? I lost to Mette. We can never go back there, or at least I can’t. You can still return if you pledge acceptance to Mette.”

“Pledge acceptance to...I think you hit your head way too hard when you fell downstream.”

“Why not? I shamed you, and I failed the pack. You always said one Alpha’s as good as another.”

She stared at him in disbelief, “This isn’t you talking, Caleb. It’s fear or stupid pride or guilt, but it isn’t you.”

“Leave me alone, Tia,” he murmured, rolling painfully onto his side. Moments later he heard the bedroom door close.

It was nearly an hour later that he collected himself enough to move from the bed, wash, and dress in black drawstring pants and a T-shirt. He painfully descended the steps, favoring his injured ankle. Tia was sharing a meal in the kitchen with Curtis.

“It’s about time.” Curtis’s words were sharp, but his eyes showed relief.

“Thanks for all you’ve done, Curtis.”

“Does it warrant a pay raise? Just kidding.”

Caleb turned to Tia who had placed her fork beside the plate of rare meat and fresh salad. She looked so much like she had when he’d first approached her after years of separation.

Curtis excused himself, leaving the couple alone.

“So are you done feeling sorry for yourself yet?” Tia demanded, pushing aside her chair as she walked to the window, folding her arms across her waist and staring toward the dark, distant wood.

He pulled her into his arms, and she squeezed him tightly.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered against her hair.

She lifted her mouth to his. “You should be.”

“Selfish as it is, I’m glad you stayed with me.”

“Caleb, we mated for life. I would follow you anywhere, just like you followed me for all those years when everyone else was ready to give up.”

He traced her cheekbone with his fingertip. “I’m tired of fighting, tired of worrying about everyone else. There are times when I’ve missed living in the human world, looking after my own investments instead of having Curtis do it all.”

Tia smiled sadly, a knowing expression in her eyes. “You want to live in man form for a while. Okay, but we’ll have to go back someday, Caleb. It’s our pack.”

He didn’t reply, merely held her.

*By the end of the week, Caleb's physical injuries had healed without leaving a scar. His soul was not so easily restored. According to all the laws of his kind, he should be dead, but he was alive, residing in the human world.*

*Coward. The word constantly plagued his mind. It dissolved the exuberance for life which he had always possessed. At night, when Tia, naked and loving, approached him, he was unable to take her. Though his body reacted to her beauty, he couldn't help feeling that a woman of her strength and courage deserved a more respectable mate.*

*They traveled to Europe where, for several months, they lost themselves in human history and art. Tia indulged his need to hide, but he knew that she missed the woods and life with the pack. He nearly laughed at the irony; she had been raised as a human but had never felt comfortable in their world. Caleb, brought up as a hunter, primed for leadership, had always felt an inexplicable connection to humanity. Still, deep inside, he longed for home as much as Tia. Sometimes when he closed his eyes, he could still smell the damp earth and hear the water pouring down from the flume.*

*He remembered running through the wood, being the most powerful animal on Earth.*

*He hadn't shifted shape since the fight with Mette, and though the desire to change clawed him from within, he refused to indulge it, thinking it a fitting punishment for his crime.*

*One night, while he and Tia were staying in a hotel on the outskirts of Seville, the urge to shift was so overwhelming that he slipped from the bed, glancing once at Tia's sleeping face. A run might tire him enough to forget. Though he appeared human, his strength and endurance far exceeded a man's, and soon he'd reached the grassy hills of Southern Spain. Rather than soothe his desire, each mile he covered only served to excite the wolf within him. He longed to race over the meadows on four legs. He wanted to challenge the wind itself.*

*He caught Tia's familiar scent on the breeze as the female wolf darted past him, grazing his side with her muzzle. He felt her laughing at him, taunting him.*

*She howled, a challenge for him to shift shape and catch her if he still remembered how to truly run.*

*His teeth lengthened, and power surged through his fur-covered limbs.*

*Tia was a speck in the distance, but as his speed increased, he closed in upon her until they raced side by side. He leapt, knocking her onto the grass, pinning her body sensuously beneath his.*

*I've missed you, Caleb, she communicated silently with him as their teeth locked and their claws raked each other's skins.*

*It was nearly dawn when they arrived back at the hotel, and their newly found bliss was destroyed by an urgent message from Curtis. Back home there had been a recent string of killings. Authorities blamed the mutilations on an unusually large black bear. Most of the hunters sent to kill the bear had been slaughtered as well.*

*"You know as well as I do that no bear is doing all this." The strain in Curtis' voice was audible through the phone lines.*

*"Most of the bodies were found on or around your land."*

*Caleb clenched his teeth with rage. "Mette. He's been obsessed with the old ways. He believes we should be eating human flesh."*

*"Another thing, this kid Silvan has been hanging around. Says he knows you and needs to talk to you about the clan."*

*"Tell him I'll be there soon," Caleb said and hung up the phone as he turned to Tia who stared at him with questioning eyes. "We're going home."*

*She released her pent up breath. "It's about time."*

As Caleb drove along the dark, empty highway and into the mountains, he caught the familiar scent of home and felt longing and confusion. The desire to run with his pack was almost overwhelming, but to do so he must win back their respect. That meant challenging Mette, and this time it would be to the death.

He glanced at Tia. Though she sat, hands folded in her lap in a demure human gesture, he noticed the wildness in her eyes and felt the tension from her body as the wolf lurked beneath her calm veneer.

They had scarcely spoken during the long drive from the airport, and when they reached Caleb's house, Curtis hurried to the driveway to meet them, shadowed by a rangy youth whom Caleb recognized as Silvan. He noted that the cub had grown up, much more adult than child. Nearly as tall as Caleb himself, he was lean and muscled, yet his movements lacked grace, as if he was not yet accustomed to the rapid growth endured by shapeshifters of his age.

"Finally," Curtis snapped. "It's been a blood feast around here. Two more bodies were found today..."

"It's Mette," Silvan interrupted, rage in his dark eyes. "He's gone crazy. Thinks we should feed on human flesh like in the old days."

"The rest of the pack?" Caleb asked.

The youth snarled. "What pack? It split a few months after you...left."

"Split?" Tia narrowed her eyes.

"Some of us couldn't take anymore of Mette, so we moved to the other side of the forest. The others have been killing with him, but not all of them want to. They're just too afraid of him to leave. The fighting is constant between us. A lot of good wolves have died."

Tia cursed softly.

Caleb's own body was tense with fury, more at himself than at Mette.

“Who’s been leading the shifters that split?”

“I have.” Silvan’s expression was almost pleading as he looked into Caleb’s eyes. “But I don’t have the experience. I feel like it’s my fault so many have died....”

Caleb shook his head. “You’ve stood for what you believe in. Whenever that happens, people die. Unfortunately the only way to acquire leadership experience is through your own mistakes. You’re very young, Silvan, but you’ve done well.”

The youth looked relieved. “At least now you can take over.”

Caleb drew a deep breath and turned away. He felt three pairs of eyes scorching his back.

“That’s why you came back, isn’t it?” Silvan pressed.

“Of course that’s why he came back,” Curtis snapped and raised an eyebrow at Caleb. “Isn’t it?”

“Even if I go back and challenge Mette, who’s to say that the clan will still want me? I left in shame.”

The next moments were like the silence which follows the end of a burial.

Then Silvan walked around to face Caleb. Any of the awe he had once felt for the pack leader was suddenly replaced by disillusioned fury.

“I came to you because I thought you were the only one strong enough to help us, but it looks like I’ll have to fight Mette myself.” Silvan’s teeth lengthened and hair bristled on his skin.

“He’ll kill you,” Caleb stated. Silvan was powerful and courageous, but he was still far too young to fight Mette and win.

“I’d rather be dead than see the clan destroyed.”

Silvan leapt across the tar and into the forest, changing shape as he ran.

Tia shouted to him, but the boy was too angry to hear.

She glanced at Caleb, terror in her eyes. “Mette will slaughter him.”

Without replying, Caleb bounded after Silvan, slipping into wolf form, power surging through his body with every step that took him closer toward home. The sounds of the forest cried out to him, and the tree branches lashed him toward the inevitable.

He felt Tia following close behind him, and they soon caught up to Silvan. For a moment, both males raced shoulder to shoulder, for the first time in his life, Silvan not deferring to Caleb. As they soared over a fallen tree, Caleb took the lead, Silvan dropping behind him.

Caleb caught Mette’s scent long before he saw him bellowing a speech in the center of the village. Wolves formed a circle around him, and as Caleb bounded into their midst, they snarled at him, teeth snapping at his heels. He kicked them aside, his eyes focused on Mette.

“You can’t challenge me,” Mette stated. “You ran off like a frightened deer. Who could respect you after that?”

“Afraid to fight me when I’m not wounded, Mette? You don’t have a choice.”

“They won’t follow you, Caleb.” The wolf gestured with his clawed hands. “They’ve gotten the taste of human flesh. We’re back to the old ways, and to hell with your preaching about mercy. We don’t want peace. We’re born savages.”

Silvan arrived with Tia and his own small pack. They approached the village center, keeping a respectful distance behind Caleb but growling at the others.

“You’ve caused me enough trouble, brat.” Mette swiped at Silvan with his paw, but Caleb leapt at him, knocking him onto the ground.

Locked together, teeth gnashing, their blood spurting onto the wolves who dispersed to a safer distance, Caleb and Mette engaged in their final battle for the clan.

As Mette's fangs and claws sank into his flesh, Caleb's thoughts weren't of the pain or of the fight he'd lost. Fury and power surged through his body with every slash of paw and click of teeth. He had seen the fear in the eyes of the pack in spite of how their blood screamed with the recent taste of human flesh. They might have been savage once, but they had changed.

As Mette managed to throw Caleb several feet into the dirt, Caleb looked up and saw Tia and Silvan fighting with a few random wolves who supported Mette. Tia's ears were flattened against her sleek head, and her muzzle dripped with blood. Never had she looked more fierce or beautiful. She had believed in Caleb even when he hadn't believed in himself, and he would not fail her again.

Mette picked up a flaming log from the central fire and jabbed it at Caleb. Sparks singed his fur, but Caleb grasped the log from Mette's hand and threw it aside, leaping at his old enemy with the blind battle fury which had made him the clan leader for so long. His teeth sank into Mette's shoulder, and the wolf howled, swiping Caleb's eyes with his claws. Caleb jerked back, feeling the razor slash. Blood shot from four claw marks along the corner of his eye, but gratefully his vision wasn't harmed.

Mette had used Caleb's few seconds of distraction to flee. Caleb followed, down the rock and root-strewn paths, across brooks, and into the field close to the highway.

Tia, Silvan, and the rest of the pack followed, anxious to see the outcome of the fight, though they already guessed what it would be.

Fear pushed Mette ahead of Caleb and close to train tracks. Even as he ran, Caleb smelled the fumes from the engine and felt his body tingle with excitement. Closer and closer he edged until he was right at Mette's flying heels. The sound of the train vibrated in his ears as the speeding vehicle crept closer to him and Mette as they ran nose to nose.

Mette must have sensed the same finality, for he turned to Caleb, hatred gleaming in his eyes. Ahead the tracks

disappeared between trees and rocks, with only enough room for the train to pass. Caleb flew ahead of Mette who also leapt forward in an attempt to knock Caleb into the train. Just before the train disappeared in the trees, both wolves leapt across the tracks.

Caleb felt the familiar brush of metal against his fur as he once again beat the train. He slowed his pace, shifting to man form. Panting, drenched in sweat and blood, he stared at Mette's remains scattered on the track.

Silently, the pack members joined him. Tia approached, and though he saw concern in her eyes, he also saw intense pride and relief.

The pack watched him cautiously, as if unsure of him. He threw back his head and howled to the cloudless sky. The others shrieked their allegiance to their true leader.

Tia's body curled around him as she shifted upward, her sleek fur turning to warm flesh against his.

"I love you, Caleb," she whispered close to his ear.

His arm locked around her waist as he kissed her to a chorus of howling that Caleb was certain even Curtis could hear back at the house.

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# **Umndo's Revenge**

Terry Bramlett

# I

She awoke covered in blood. Sighing, Amanda threw back the covers and trudged to the bathroom, leaving red footprints on the hardwood floor of her bedroom. She started water in the bathtub and gazed in the mirror. She found no injuries, no marks of any kind. But then, she never did. Blood had caked around her eyes. The green of her irises complemented the brownish-red color of the dried blood. The golden ring around her neck on a chain glittered in the bathroom light. It reminded her of the blood's significance. *Whom did I kill this time?* she wondered. She stepped into the steaming water and eased into the tub.

The news of the killing would not reach the newspapers on this world. In fact, she knew it had not occurred here at all. Every time, the battle she waged had been elsewhere or elsewhen. She could not be certain. Except, of course, for that time in Pittsburgh when the creatures had found her on this world. The police had been interested, but could not find anything to connect her with any killing. That seemed to irritate the detective, which amused her.

*I don't know why they keep coming after me,* she thought. *It seems they would finally learn that I am not a threat to them unless they threaten me.* She knew the reasons, though. She just wanted the killing to end. She soaped a rag, scrubbing her body with a ferocity she showed in battle. She tried to wash away the guilt as much as she did the blood. She let the water out and stuck her head under the faucet. She watched the red, soapy water flow down the drain leaving her long, blonde hair wet, but untainted.

Clean, she buffed her body dry. Her image captured her attention. Wrinkles had not begun to attack her thirty-one year old face and neck, though she knew in a few years age would transgress into her life. Eventually, they would kill her. *I'll*

*have to be old and decrepit for that*, she thought, grimacing at herself in the mirror. At five-ten and a bit over one hundred and fifty-five pounds, Amanda presented a formidable challenge for the smaller creatures that hunted her. The only fat on her body showed in the places where fat should have been, in the mammary glands and the roundness of her hips. Muscles did not ripple, but they showed. Her eyes emanated more age than her years. Killing did that to a person. Amanda could see the loneliness that she felt.

## II

In the basement of their country home, Amanda and her father fenced with sabers. At the age of twelve, she thought all girls learned the art of sword fighting. On that particular day, her mind wandered from the task at hand.

“Amanda, you’ve got to pay attention to what you’re doing,” her father admonished. “This is extremely important for your survival. One day they will get to me and they’ll start coming after you.”

“Who will come after me, Daddy?” she asked, exasperation showing in her voice. She dropped her saber to her side. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

Her father smiled at her. She saw the sadness of the smile. “I wish your mother were here,” he said. The words flowed softly from his lips. “She understood better than anyone what this meant.” The mention of her mother surprised Amanda. He never talked about her. She asked nothing else, though the questions tried to burst from her. Who was her mother? How did she die? Is her death why I have to learn all these weapons? But Amanda would not ask him about her. She heard her father crying in the middle of the night, calling her mother’s name, invoking her spirit before his battles.

“Amanda,” he said to her. She looked at him. Tears flowed down his face as he spoke. “Don’t ever get married, Amanda. In your world, it would not be fair to your husband or to you. They’ll just use him against you in the end. They have used your mother against me.” He laid the saber on a table and walked away. Less than a year later, her father died. She never saw his body, but she knew he was dead. That’s when the creatures started coming for her.

### III

Sunlight filled the bathroom. Amanda cried remembering her father and for her loneliness. She had kept his father's words close to her heart. She clutched the ring hanging from her neck as if it kept her father alive and vibrant for her. No man in this world held her attention long enough to do more than satisfy basic needs. She grew tired of the vapid men of the present society. None of them could survive in her world. A man waited for her in another life, in another place. She was certain that he waited to kill her, not love her. The tears stopped when she realized that she cried for herself. That constituted weakness and a warrior could not afford any weakness. Her opponents would use it against her.

She thought of the man as she dressed. He was blond like her and almost as tall. Why she was attracted to the creature she could not fathom. But her insides trembled when she saw him at the battles she waged. He was always watching her. Did he feel as she felt? She would never know. He was bodyguard to the Creature King. Amanda figured he only watched her as a possible threat to his liege. *Enough of him*, she thought.

She finished dressing and walked into the kitchen for breakfast, realizing that she needed food after last night. Others would call it a dream state, but Amanda understood she had physically traveled to the other world to face her enemy. She grabbed two pieces of bread and slapped them into the toaster. Studying the inside of the small apartment refrigerator, she chose tangerines and grapes. Milk filled a glass. She smelled the bread toasting.

A sharp pain went through her head. Amanda grunted and grabbed at her temples. "No, damn it! You will not take me against my will while I am awake." She railed at the unseen force. The room spun. She tried to reach the counter for a handhold before she lost her balance. She did not make it. Amanda fell, but she never hit the floor.

## IV

She went to live with an uncle in Southern California. He spent little time with her, but he did continue the regimen of training her father had started. Amanda learned a thousand ways to kill. She learned nothing of love. One day her uncle appeared at the gym he had built for her. At sixteen, she had already killed thirty of the creatures without knowing why. All she knew was she had been trained for this life. Hormones raged through her, but most had been sated with battle. She remembered her father's words and formed no attachments to other people. She thought of her mother often, wondering why she had been told little about her. Her uncle's appearance at her workout gave her an opportunity.

“Uncle Ned,” she said, greeting him without emotion. She wondered why he was there, but she would not ask. Too much knowledge could be dangerous for her, her father had once said. But it was knowledge that she craved. She wanted to know about her mother. She wanted to why the little creatures kept coming for her only to die. They seemed to know they should die in the quest. Amanda felt sorry for them, but she understood they would kill her if given the chance. She never gave that chance.

But there were other worlds that came to her unbidden. At night when she slept, she traveled. Amanda never went to the same world twice, except for the one with the creatures. Lately, she began to believe that the creatures called her there.

“Amanda, how are you?” Uncle Ned asked. She pondered the question. Did Uncle Ned really care how she felt? She decided it was an inane question and did not answer. Uncle Ned seemed not to notice. “I hope that you have all the materials you need.” Again she treated the statement with silence, waiting for an opening to question him. He had to know something. He cleared his throat, breaking the silence and regarded her gravely.

“I have been struggling with this for years, now, Amanda,” he said. He did not look at her. She sensed that he feared her. She did not know why. “It was your father’s wish that you not be told the truth, but I feel you should know.”

“Does this relate to my mother?” Uncle Ned flinched from the question. He glanced into her eyes briefly, then looked away. He did not answer the question. Why was her mother such a source of pain to Uncle Ned and her father? *Daddy, I wish you were here.* Amanda saw an echo of her father in his brother, but the resemblance was slight and she thought she was a responsibility that Uncle Ned would rather not have had to take upon himself. Well, he didn’t do much with me, anyway, she thought. She waited for her uncle to collect his thoughts.

“Amanda,” he began, speaking slowly as if picking the right words. “Our family has unique talents that others on Earth do not possess.” He paced in front of him. Amanda found a chair and looked up at his pacing. “You, I have reason to believe, share in that trait.” She interrupted him.

“Do you mean the traveling?” The question stopped his pacing. Uncle Ned turned to face her squarely.

“Do you know when you’re traveling and when you’re dreaming? Have you discerned the difference?” The questions fired her curiosity. Uncle Ned waited for her reply.

“When I am dreaming, it is not real,” she said. “When I am traveling, I know what is real and what is not. The creatures come from my traveling, do they not?”

“Creatures?” Uncle Ned wore a puzzled frown. “Do you mean the Bonhar? They are as human as you, girl. Why do you call them creatures?” Amanda shrugged. She had always thought of them as creatures. To her, they were no more human than a mouse, irritatingly running through a kitchen on Thanksgiving morning. Bonhar. She let the name roll around her brain. Her father had used the term once or twice, otherwise he did not speak of them. All he did was teach Amanda how to kill them.

“No, my niece,” Uncle Ned said. “The Bonhar are not ‘creatures.’ But to answer your question: The Bonhar would come from one of the worlds of your travels.”

“Why do they come for me?” It was a question her father would never answer. Before Uncle Ned could answer, she asked the question, she could never ask her father. “Why did they kill my mother and father?”

Uncle Ned grimaced. She could tell he wished he had never started this conversation. “Your father stole something from them,” he said, quietly. Uncle Ned glanced at her, then stared at his shoes. Amanda wondered how her father’s brother could be so weak. “He stole something very special.” He looked around the gym to see who had appeared in thin air. Amanda would have known if any one had entered. She would not let the creatures or anyone else hurt her uncle. She would do that much for her father.

“Have they ever come for you?”

He looked at her. “No,” he whispered. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them and stared at her. “I have never been to their world. John made sure the rest of the family would not be involved. He gave us the, well I guess coordinates is the best way to say it. Not exactly accurate, but it’ll do.”

Amanda thought for a moment. “I had never been to their world before they pulled me there and started trying to kill me.”

“You are connected to them, Amanda,” he said. He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. She hated the feel of his flabby hand on her, but she did not brush him away. It was the first time anyone had touched her without sexual overtones in years. She had not liked the boys in school touching her, but she always put a stop to it, if she wanted.

“How?” Amanda looked Uncle Ned in the eyes. “In what way am I connected to those creatures? Through my father?”

Uncle Ned studied her for a few moments. He removed his hand and took a step back from her. “Yes, Amanda, through

your father.” He turned and walked away, almost running in case she asked another question. Her eyes bored holes in his back. Amanda knew he was lying.

## V

She hit the hard dirt floor of a hut. Amanda glanced around her. A torch flickered on the opposite side of the room. A mural of rich colors adorned the wall behind the torch. In most of the pictures, a long-haired blonde woman fought hundreds of creatures. The woman wore nothing but a sword and a grimace of fierce determination. At the top of the mural, a saber hung lengthwise, an obvious tribute. Amanda grimaced. She stood, turning three hundred sixty degrees to ascertain the presence of others. She was alone. Absently, her hand went to the ring around her neck. It was the only thing that followed her on her travels. Other than the ring she arrived on each world with nothing. On the wall opposite the mural, clothing lay across a ragged bed. She felt the chill of the night air and remembered her nakedness. She slipped the tunic over her head and sat, listening.

In the distance, she heard the roar of a crowd and knew that one of the festivals progressed toward its violent, sensual ending. Someone died tonight, she thought. She wondered if this was the funeral for the creature she dispatched a few hours earlier. Time ran parallel on her world and the Bonhar world, though it was day on this world when it was night on her own. She knew of other places where she could be gone days and only minutes passed upon returning home. On other worlds, she would be there only minutes, only to find hours or days elapsed on her world.

She stood and walked to the door, peering out cautiously. Caution, not fear ruled her. Amanda always arrived unarmed, but the creatures armed her. A sword or other weapon would lie within easy reach of where she appeared. If she had to fight without weapons, she had no doubt she would be victorious over one of them. They always fought her one at a time, a ritual battle held at irregular intervals. It's too soon for another, she thought. Outside the hut, she saw a sprinkling of shelters becoming more numerous toward the center of the village

where the festival continued. What had brought her here? She shook her head. She decided against leaving. Whoever had wanted her surely knew she waited. Amanda went inside the hut and sat on the bed. She closed her eyes, tired from the travels.

She woke with a jump to her feet, listening for what had startled her awake. Satisfied she was alone, she sat back on the bed. The silence told her the festival had ended. "Maybe they'll get here soon," she said aloud just to hear her voice. The creatures had never done this before, bring her to the world and then not attack her. But then, they had never come to her world before Pittsburgh. Of course, they had not returned since either.

Footsteps sounded on the dirt outside the hut. They stopped at the door and hesitated. Someone else walked past and mumbled a greeting. The person outside the door said nothing in response. She smelled the sickly sweet smell of marihuana being lit. *Ah, she thought, it's a shaman who brought me.* Maybe the shaman would regret bringing the she-devil into his abode. Amanda stood and surreptitiously moved beside the opening. She wanted to be behind the shaman when he entered.

Another set of footsteps sounded outside the entrance. She heard the walker stop before the hut. "What are doing here, old man?" Derision soaked the words in the strong, young voice. "Go away and take your foul-smelling weed with you." Amanda heard no reply. The 'old man' did not move. "Bah!" said the voice. She heard the second set of footsteps move to the opening. Amanda held back a gasp when she saw the blond hair on the head on the man. The muscular, tanned body glistened in the torch light. He wore a leather gherkin and pants made from what appeared to be cotton or linen. He stopped, hearing the breathing of another person.

He turned and whipped something toward her. Amanda ducked when she saw the flash of the blade. The edge missed her by inches. She moved forward rapidly and delivered three fast blows to the midsection of the blond haired man. In seconds, his sword became hers. She stood over him as he

gasped for breath. Amanda heard laughter coming from the hut opening. An old man smoked a pipe, showing crooked yellow teeth. He laughed at the sight of her and turned away still consumed with his mirth.

## VI

Amanda was twenty-one when she first saw him. Her summons to the world of the Bonhar happened in the normal manner, when she slept. The dirt of the wooden arena kicked up around her as she materialized. A hush fell over the crowd of creatures. She arrived naked and defenseless. One of the Bonhar stood opposite her in the middle of a circular wooden fence. His brown body possessed no apparel, but he was armed with a sword. The arena occupied a depression in the landscape. Looking around her, she stared at thousands of faces. Thousands of eyes stared back at her. At her back, the royal box stood. The wrinkled king of the creatures, flanked by the shaman who summoned her, would utter his incantation and the warrior in front of her would rush into his death. But he would wait for her to acknowledge him.

She glanced around the dirt for the sword. She knelt and examined the blade. A hint of familiarity struck her about the weapon. It was a saber, almost identical to the one her father always used when training her. She loved that sword. She loved the way it became an extension of her arm and hand. She retrieved the saber and took a couple of practice swipes. This weapon was hand-crafted with her in mind. The balance fit her perfectly. Most of the swords they provided her showed crude design for functional use only. She admired the saber by holding it to the sunlight. *This is a work of art*, she thought.

She brought the blade to her face and saluted the warrior creature opposite her, the way her father taught her. The warrior ignored the gesture, glaring at her. Amanda noticed the bladders arranged around the arena, hoisted by simple levers. The animal blood consecrated the victor. She hated the ceremony, but they would not send her back without it. Unlike other worlds in her travels, the Bonhar could keep her indefinitely, if she did not perform her ritual duties. The warrior became as sacrificial as the animals whose blood filled the bladders. She heard movement behind her.

She turned toward the king and stared. Even with the saber in her hands, she decided to defy the Bonhar. She wanted to deny them their bloodlust. Behind the king she saw him. She took a sharp breath and let it out fast. Her heart quickened. He was the most beautiful youth she had ever seen. His blond hair flowed to his shoulders, almost as long as hers. Most of the creatures were short and wiry. This youth was tall by their standards. Beneath a leather vest, his body showed muscular development she had not seen among the Bonhar. He was beautiful. Amanda wondered if he was from off world. He could not be one of them. The king noticed her attention and motioned for the youth to move forward.

“You would fight him?” the king asked. For a moment, Amanda stared at the youth, unaware the king had spoken. Amused, the king began to laugh. His question registered with her and anger built within.

“I would not fight him,” she said. She held the saber to the sky and walked around the small arena, giving a wide berth to the other warrior. She did not wish to startle him into an attack. The crowd murmured as she past each section. She returned to the king’s box. “I will not fight today.” The king stared at her, grimacing with disgust. Amanda saw a subtle gesture of his hand.

Behind her, a loud battle cry filled the arena. She turned with the saber ready to deflect the charge. His sword clanged with her sword as she parried a blow to the head. He swiped at her side which she easily defended. She gave the warrior an opening. The creature’s eyes became large with excitement and he lunged. Amanda closed the opening as she planned and caught the warrior by the wrist as he lunged past her. Her right knee caught his abdomen. The warrior fell to his knees. She brought the hilt of the saber on the back of his head, not hard enough to kill, but hard enough to incapacitate her opponent. She turned to the king and glared.

“Today, I fight in defense of self only,” she yelled at the king, so the entire arena could hear. Silence overtook the air. Even the birds stopped singing. “Today, I will not kill.” She threw the saber into the ground beside the fallen warrior,

missing his unconscious body by inches. Behind her, the king clapped his hands twice.

From separate entrances, dozens of soldiers surrounded her. Amanda circled, trying to find a weakness in the lines. Finding none, she attacked the largest person she could find in the front circle. A foot to the side of the knee put him on the ground. Five other creatures went down in various stages of pain and injury before the soldiers subdued her. Restrained by rope, they lifted her into the royal box with the king. The blond youth checked her for wounds. She stared into his eyes. The blue eyes held intelligence and a gentleness she had not seen among the other creatures. She saw a hint of a smile on his face. The youth turned to the king.

“She is unharmed, sire,” the youth said. Amanda heard the baritone voice. Strong, but gentle in tone, the voice would haunt her dreams when she did not travel.

“Thank you, Atvar,” the king said. “Position her where she will see.” Four sets of hands grabbed her head and faced her toward the arena. The warrior she vanquished, but spared stood naked in the middle of the arena tied to a wooden post. The soldiers that subdued her encircled him. The warrior screamed in fear.

A lance lashed out to the lower thigh, just above the knee. Blood trickled from the wound. A sword found the right ribcage. The warrior screamed in pain. One after another, soldiers randomly cut and brutalized the warrior. The crowd roared its approval. Amanda tried to turn her head, but with extra hands, they forced her to watch. She cut her eyes toward the Atvar the blond youth. He watched the torture without obvious emotion. He glanced at her and she saw anger in his eyes. He directed his anger toward her. The king turned and looked at her.

“This is your responsibility,” he said shouting over the screams of the warrior. “It could take hours for them to finally kill him. You must understand that for you to leave, he must die.”

“Let me go to the arena,” she said. She resigned herself to the task. The warrior suffered enough. *This needs to end*, she thought. Hands unbound her. She stood and glared down at the king. Atvar came to her side holding out the saber. She looked at him and then the weapon.

“You receive the weapon upon return to the arena, not near the king,” Atvar said. Amanda nodded. She tore her eyes from the youth. His eyes forgave her for her indiscretion in allowing a fellow warrior be tortured instead of killing him in battle. She jumped to the arena floor, a four foot drop from the royal box. Atvar smiled at her and presented the saber to her. He straightened and shouted to the soldiers, “Make way!”

Amanda walked to the warrior. Cuts and bruises adorned his body. He whimpered in pain. She leaned toward him. “I’m sorry,” she said. The warrior spit in her face. Saliva ran down her nose and cheeks toward her chin. She did not wipe it away, but raised the saber and ran the blade through his heart, ending his misery instantly. The crowd screamed in derision and excitement. “Umndo. Umndo.” She walked the circle beneath the bladders full of animal blood, ignoring the cries of the crowd. The contents washed down upon her. She made her way back to the king and Atvar. She held the saber in both hands toward Atvar.

“Care for this,” she said. Atvar bowed and took it from her. “May I leave now?”

The king stared down at her. “You must kill the opponent or we will kill him slowly, without the dignity of battle.”

“You go to hell!” Fire burned from her eyes. She noticed Atvar staring at her. She turned to the shaman and snapped, “Send me home.” The scene began to fade away from her.

## VII

The old man's laughter resounded in her ears. Atvar sat up slowly, breathing heavily. He eyed Amanda with suspicion as he struggled to his feet. Amanda sat on the bed across the room, watching him. He stood, holding his stomach. He glanced toward the saber on the wall and back to her. Amanda showed no reaction. Atvar shrugged and turned toward her.

"What are you doing here? There is nothing scheduled for a couple of months." He moved to a small chair in front of the mural.

"I was going to ask you the same question," she said. "I assumed that the owner of this hut was the person who brought me to Bonhar." The laughter of the old man sounded in the distance. She turned her head toward the sound. Fast movement caught her eye. She was on her feet without thinking. Atvar's sword gripped in her left hand.

Atvar stood in front of the mural gripping the saber Amanda gave him for care. "Did you come to assassinate me?" He snarled the words at her. "I am willing to die, but so shall you, Umundo."

Amanda stood relaxed, carefully observing Atvar's movements. He called her Umando, a Bonhar word that meant 'one born to power.' She recognized the defensive nature of his stance. He expected her to rush him, an action for which she would dearly pay. She had seen him fight in the arena, not long ago. The king would not release her until after the battle. Atvar exhibited a master's skill with the sword. Amanda was excellent with her saber, but it was her close quarters fighting that made the difference in her ritual battles. *He could be my better with steel*, she thought.

She smiled at him, dropped his sword on the bed, and moved slowly away following the contour of the wall. Atvar tilted his head to one side and circled in the opposite direction. When he reached the bed, he picked up his sword. Amanda

stopped in front of the mural. Finding the chair, she sat, putting herself at a distinct disadvantage should he charge her. Atvar could kill her. She remembered the battle he fought. Eventually the two would probably meet in the arena. She wondered if she could cause his death. Amanda felt the stirrings of her ten year crush. She fought back the emotions. Her face showed nothing. Her eyes took in Atvar's every move.

Atvar stood with both swords in his hand. He suddenly grinned at her and tossed the saber toward her. She caught the hilt, but remained seated. He sat. "Again, I ask, why are you here?"

"I'm not sure, Atvar," she said, shrugging. "But I think that old shaman brought me here to your hut for a reason."

Atvar snorted. "He is an old fool," he said. "He sees visions and tries to make them true."

"Maybe so, but if he brought me here, then he is more powerful than you give him credit." She heard the shaman's laughter in the distance. Could he hear their conversation? "Why did you think I had come to assassinate you?"

"Many layers of ruling warriors have lost their lives from assassins, recently," he said. "Many thought you had been the killer."

She shook her head. "No, Atvar, I am weary of killing. I wouldn't kill outside the arena, except to save a life, including my own." She thought back to the Pittsburgh attack on her. That could have been an assassination attempt. The shaman who allowed that event must have been powerful. The laughter sounded again.

"Why would I kill you, Atvar?"

He stared at her dumbfounded. "You have fought for this long and yet do not know for what you fight? We fight for the rule of Bonhar, Umundo."

The right to rule Bonhar? She hid her surprise. "My name is Amanda, Atvar, not Umundo."

He shook his head. “No, you are Umundo, the one born to rule.” He bowed toward her. “You are legend come to life.” He pointed to the mural behind her.

Amanda stood, saber dangling from her left side. She ignored Atvar’s defensive posture. She noticed him physically relax as she turned to face the wall. Behind where the saber was kept read a legend above the mural. “Umundo’s Revenge.” Revenge for what? she thought. My father and mother?

She studied the mural closely. The long-haired blonde woman fought in the same arena against the hordes of creatures. In the mural’s opposite corner she could discern a flicker of blond hair beneath a mound of warriors. She sighed and brought the saber up to her face, cradling the weapon with both hands. Gently, she replaced it to its place of honor. She felt Atvar’s presence, knowing he had moved behind her. Amanda turned to face him.

“Umundo,” he whispered, “I would give my life for you, in your service. I do not wish to face you in the arena. Perhaps you would win, but if not.” His face contorted with pain. “If I harmed you I would harm myself.” He stared into her eyes. She felt the emotions stirring within her. She caressed his right cheek with her left hand. Amanda felt a tear roll down the side of her face. She moved her hand behind his head and pulled his face close to her, kissing him softly on the lips. She heard the cackle of the old shaman in the distance.

She ignored the laughter and concentrated on Atvar. Her lips parted and her tongue licked at his lips. Powerful arms enveloped her. The kisses became more passionate. Amanda found herself sliding out of her robe and leading him toward the bed. A few hours later, the light of the torch faded as they collapsed exhausted in each other’s arms.

## VIII

Years earlier, in her sleep, she heard Uncle Ned calling her, beckoning her to follow him. Amanda opened her eyes and saw the swirling darkness that accompanied the crossover from one world to another. She could feel movement, but no wind. Feather light, she floated through the void toward the opening before her. Sunlight streamed through the darkness until reaching her face. The changeover from her world to the other seemed natural. Peace flowed within her. She only fought traveling when the Bonhar came for her. That trip filled her with pain.

She floated into the sunlight and gently fell toward the figure below her. Waves lapped peacefully at a beach. She landed beside her uncle naked. Clothes never made the passage into other worlds. A red swimming suit lay on a towel within her reach. Uncle Ned studied the ocean while she slipped into the suit. She studied the curvature of the horizon as a red sun nipped the edges of the ocean water. A smaller star gave off precious little light, but kept darkness from the dusk. They sat in silence for hours staring at the water. Amanda waited for Uncle Ned to tell her why he called her.

“I could watch these two sunsets forever,” he said. He pointed toward the smaller star. “In our world, that’s Jupiter. Made the big time here.” Amanda stared at the star. Uncle Ned fell silent. She looked at him. He was gaunt. Amanda could tell he had lost a lot of weight. He shook as he pointed at the star and as he reached for the drink on the beach beside him. He noticed her, but did not turn to her.

“I’m dying, Amanda. The doctors give me six months to live.” She was shocked. She sniffled as her nose began to run. Tears fell from her cheek to the sand. She watched the sand splatter with each drop. They had never been close, but he was her father’s brother, the only living relative she had. He turned to her, surprised by her tears.

“Don’t cry for me dear.” He reached across and brushed a teardrop off her face. “In this place, my six months will last decades. That’s why I’m here.” He shifted in his chair and smiled at her. “I called you here to tell you this, but there are other things I tried to say years ago, but I could not. I was afraid of you, Amanda.”

“Uncle Ned, I would never have hurt you.”

“Oh, not you personally, but of the responsibility for you, child.” He sighed at her. A cough racked his body. He regained control and continued. “I knew that if I did not keep up the training your father began, I could lose you. You are my niece, my brother’s child after all. Even so, there were things I held back. Things I thought it was best you did not know. I’m sorry, Amanda. I was wrong.”

A bony hand reached toward her. Amanda took it and cradled it in her own hands. “I think you did fine raising me. I never lacked for a thing and I always knew you were there if I needed you.”

He smiled at the last. “You never needed me. It wasn’t until recently that I realized how much I had needed you.” Tears rolled down his face. He turned back toward the sea, quiet for a long while. Amanda held his hand. He squeezed it weakly. She waited for Uncle Ned to continue at his own pace. The sun dropped below the horizon, leaving only the dim light from the small star. He let go of her hand and turned toward her.

“Amanda, you look a lot like your mother,” he began, smiling. “Tishar was a sweet woman. Madly in love with your father. He had traveled to Bonhar quite by accident one night. John had no particular place to go and you know how we just end up in places according to the whims of our subconscious.

“The Bonhar are a tough people, as I know you are familiar. You might think them blood-thirsty, given your association with them, but Tishar was different. John saw her at one of the battles in the arena, never knowing that she would also be a participant. He made many trips back to the Bonhar to see her. They fell in love.”

A fit of coughing over took him. Amanda wondered why no one had told her this before. It did not change her opinion of the creatures she faced in the arena, but she was surprised to find that she was related to them. Uncle Ned reached for the drink beside him and drained the glass. He cleared his throat and continued.

“Tishar’s father was a powerful man of the Bonhar. He wasn’t pleased with the attention that John and Tishar gave to one another, so John brought her back with him. I don’t know how he did it. I’ve never been able to transfer anything, much less another human being. He alluded to me that he had help, but I don’t know.

“Anyway, from that moment forward, they were able to take John against his will to fight in their damnable tournaments. Tishar’s father, never did catch his name, told him that he would fight in his daughter’s place. But one night both of them were brought across to the Bonhar. Tishar fought and died in the arena. John went on a rampage. He must have killed a hundred of them before they finally got him. In the meantime, he trained you to take his place.”

Amanda thought about the king she had seen with the youth, Atvar, a couple of years earlier. *Is that my mother’s father?* she thought. She turned toward the ocean. “Why do they come after me, Uncle Ned? Why do they make me fight and kill?” She asked the questions with the weariness of one who killed too many. She wanted to end the carnage, but she did not know how.

He took her hand. “They come for you because you are your mother’s daughter. They can get to you because you are your father’s daughter.” He put a thin, sick hand on her chin and turned her face toward him. She saw the gauntness of his face, the jaundice of his skin. He did not look as if he would live through the night, much less the six months the doctors gave him. He smiled at her. Amanda smiled back, feeling a longing for the affection of family she had long kept at a distance. She kept everyone at a distance. *Whatever I love they will use against me*, she thought.

“I wish I knew why you must participate in their fighting, Amanda. John never told me. I think he knew though.” Uncle Ned fell silent. He turned toward the ocean and closed his eyes. She heard a soft snoring. Amanda used the blanket to cover him and held his hand.

She stayed with him for the next three years, a couple of weeks in Earth time, at his villa, getting to know him as she had never done as a child. Uncle Ned never spoke of the Bonhar again, but he did tell Amanda about her mother. Every night they would sit on the beach and watch the setting suns. She listened to every story and committed them to memory. Uncle Ned would fall asleep as the second sun set. One night he did not awake.

## IX

She lay still on the bed listening for any threatening sound. An aroma of citrus wafted into her nostrils. She heard the rustling of clothes drawn over skin. Amanda opened one eye slightly. Atvar tied a rope across his waist to keep the shirt together and his pants up. *Buttons would be a big hit here*, she thought. *And probably zippers*. Atvar walked to the wall where his sword and scabbard hung next to the mural.

“You can open the other eye now, Umundo,” he said without glancing at her. The leather belt holding the scabbard hung around his midsection, the side with his sword hanging lower. *Belts they have*, she thought. *Military innovation, no doubt*. “Umundo, quit pretending,” Atvar said. He turned toward her. “I must leave for an appointment.”

She rose to an elbow. A woolen blanket fell from her shoulder revealing her breasts. Atvar’s attention wavered from her eyes. Amanda laughed. “I’ll bet I can make you forget the appointment.” She grinned at him. He walked to her, bent down and kissed her gently on the lips. He straightened, looking down at her. A heavy sigh escaped his lungs.

“I must see a man about a fox,” Atvar said. “But stay in that position for a couple of hours and I will return.” She smiled and grabbed his belt pulling him down to the bed. She kissed him thoroughly.

“Go take care of that fox,” she said. “We have plenty of time.” Atvar hesitated, glancing at her from top to bottom. He loved her and she knew it. Amanda watched him turn away from her and almost run out the door. *I love you*, she thought toward his fleeing figure. She realized she meant it even if she doubted the words could ever flow from her lips. *I do love him*. Amanda smiled, then sighed and threw the covers back. The hard, cold, dirt floor caressed her feet. She realized that the dirt had been burned and then glazed with another

substance. The feel was not much different than the hardwood floors of her own bedroom.

Fruit, bread and milk covered a small table near the entrance to the hut. She smiled as she picked up a small tangerine and separated the rind from the fruit. Pants and a shirt lay over the back of a small chair. Amanda knew they would fit reasonably well. She tore off a piece of fruit and popped it into her mouth before setting it back on the table. She slid the clothes over her body and adjusted the fit with the rope attached. She found a scabbard on the other side of the room and pulled it around her waist. She finished the breakfast Atvar laid out for her. She rose and walked to the mural, barely noticing the picture. The saber fit snug in the scabbard. She glanced around the room, then headed for the door. The old shaman sat just outside the hut on a wooden bench, concentrating on something he held. Amanda ignored him and looked around.

Women carried jugs filled with water balanced on their heads. Children scampered about the middle of the huts that lined a dirt street. Men walked with an unknown purpose, avoiding both women and children as best they could. Take the men out of their pants and gherkins, put them in suits and they would be little different from any small town during a regular business day. The Bonhar carried on their daily lives as all the other people she had seen in her own world and in the myriad of worlds she visited.

The sun rose above green hills in the distance. Amanda smelled yeast rising from most of the huts. A cool breeze blew in from the hills, carrying the aroma of the bread past her nostrils. Peace filled her. She almost felt as though she were home. *Many things about the Bonhar could be improved*, she thought. Within the aroma of the bread mingled the smell of raw sewage. At least they put the lagoon a distance away from their huts.

“Your mother loved this place, Umindo.” She turned and saw the yellow, crooked smile of the shaman. In the light of day she recognized him as the shaman always near the king at

the arena. “Tishar stayed homesick for the entirety of her exile.”

“You knew my mother?”

“And your father,” the old man said, nodding. “I brought them together and helped them escape Boljan’s wrath. I know the insides of his dungeons well.” The shaman cackled with laughter. “Boljan thinks he punished me. All he did was make me stronger. But that’s for another time.” He motioned for her to come to the bench and sit with him. Amanda hesitated, but walked slowly to the bench, sitting away from him. She studied the shaman.

The face wrinkled heavily, giving the appearance of extreme age, but his eyes twinkled with the delight of a child. His skin was tanned though years of exposure to the sun and wind. He smiled at her with his gap-toothed crooked yellow teeth. She decided they could also do with a bit of dental care in the Bonhar village.

“I brought you here for a purpose,” he whispered to her. She glanced at the object he rolled in his hands, but he kept it covered except for brief flashes when it struck sunlight. “It is time to end the senseless killing of the arena. Too many good Bonhar, and quite a few not so good, have died for nothing in this slaughter. Especially since the outcome is known to all. Boljan is old and should have retired years ago. You shall replace him when the time is right.”

“Why should I replace Boljan? Why should the Bonhar accept me over Atvar or another of their own?”

The old man wrinkled his brow at her. “Because you are Umando, born to rule.” He reached out fast and grabbed her hand before she could react. Amanda gasped in surprise at his speed. It would not do well to underestimate this old shaman, she thought. Something cold pressed into her hand. He released just as quick and laughed, throwing his head back to the sky. He sobered for a moment. “You are Umando and you are the owner of that which I have placed in your hand. That is why the Bonhar will accept you. It is long overdue.”

Amanda opened her left hand. A golden ring glittered in the sunlight. Diamonds embedded themselves into the metal. Her hand felt for the ring around her neck, satisfying herself that it was still there. This ring was its mate.

“It was Tishar’s ring,” the shaman said. “Your mother’s ring.” The old man stood and walked away from her. Amanda focused on the ring in her hand. She slipped it onto the ring finger of her left hand. It fit snug, but not too tight. *My mother’s ring*, she thought.

## X

Scarlet leaves fell from the maples surrounding Uncle Ned's estate. Amanda walked alone, understanding that she had no one in this world. Her visits to other worlds were transitory. This world, the world of her father and uncle, was home. Other worlds displayed similar cultures, but only in this world, on this Earth could she live her life in comfort and privately. The pull of the Bonhar allowed no semblance of natural life. They could and would take her whenever they wanted.

She pulled her coat around her to foil the attack of the north wind. She knew that the season's first snow would follow. She walked to the steps leading to the old house. She turned, studying the landscape on the New Hampshire estate. Rolling hills sprawled before her to the horizon. Scarlets and yellows from distant tree leaves filled her eyes. She sighed and turned back to the house and trudged up the steps. Amanda had avoided her duty long enough.

She had marked everything for removal for the estate auctioneers. The trucks would be coming to clean out the house within the next day or two. She trudged up the stairs in the middle of the old house toward the attic. Her father's things were there. Amanda had never gone through the trunks and boxes. She opened the door and smelled the moldy odor and grimaced. Sighing, she went to work.

Most of the boxes were junk. Notes on classes he took in college. Letters from high school and college. Amanda envied the innocence he had shown in those letters. She opened a trunk and found old clothes. Dresses, obviously her mother's, filled the old wooden trunk. A jewelry box near the bottom caught her attention. She opened it. Inside, a gold ring studded with diamonds glittered in the dimly lit attic. Underneath the ring, she saw loose leaf paper yellowed with age. gingerly she opened the paper and read.

“Amanda:

“When you find this note, I will be long dead, probably killed in the unholy arena of the Bonhar. The ring in the box is mine, a wedding gift from your mother. I can no longer wear it. It hurts too much to remember her. But the love is gone and all I have is hate and the promise of revenge.

“I hope that by now you will understand the reasons I taught you to fight. You never had a childhood and for that I am truly regretful. ‘The sins of the father,’ and all that crap. The Bonhar are a good people, but they have been misled by Tishar’s father and his father before. There was no good reason to fight in the arena, but I did so gladly in defense of my wife. I loved her so much. All it did in the end was cost you a mother you will never know and probably a father much too soon.

“About your mother, you know very little, mainly because I could never bear to speak of her. But you should know this about her. She gave up her life in defense of me, Amanda.

“In the arena one night, a Bonhar warrior gained the upper hand on me and was about to slash my throat. I heard a feral yell and looked to see Tishar charging him with a saber in hand. She cut him down. The old king, Boljan, clapped his hands and soldiers appeared. They took us both captive. He forced me to watch as the soldiers tortured Tishar to death for breaking the rules of the damn tournament. The Bonhar in the arena were quiet as your mother died at her father’s hands. I swore vengeance.

“I leave my ring to you as a memory of myself and the mother you never knew.

“I love you.

“Daddy.”

Amanda wiped away tears from her stoic face. She picked up the ring. “Father, one day,” she whispered. “One day.”

## XI

She stared at the ring on her hand. Her mother's ring glittered in the Bonhar sunlight. A small crowd of people gathered round her. Several in the crowd whispered her Bonhar name. "Umando." She looked up, seeing the myriad of faces gazing at her. A mixture of fear, awe, and hope shown in their eyes. She stood from the bench and started to walk away when the crowd cleared away from her, revealing fifteen soldiers standing in a semicircle around the bench. Amanda studied their faces and stances.

Fear and awe mingled in the soldier's eyes as well. An older soldier walked up to her. His emotions kept under control. This one has seen battle, she thought. He is wary of me, but not overly frightened.

"Your presence is requested by the king," the older soldier said to her. He stood his ground with her. Amanda smiled at him and whipped the saber from its scabbard. She heard the crowd behind her gasp. The sound of many swords drawn from scabbards filled her ears. Some of the swords drawn came from the crowd of onlookers. She looked around her. Many in the crowd stood ready to come to her aid. She turned back to the older soldier.

"And if I decided not to come with you, did they tell you to kill me?" She grinned at the soldier. He looked in her eyes and glanced at the crowd moving only his eyes. Amanda pressed the point. "Did the king tell you to die in the effort to bring me to him?" The soldier shook his head.

"There will be no fight," he said between gritted teeth. "I was told to inform you of the king's wishes. That is all."

"And it took fifteen armed men to bring me this invitation?" The soldier shrugged. Amanda laughed and put away the saber. "In that case, sir, I will accompany you." Relief flooded the countenance of the vanguard behind the

older soldier. She heard members of the crowd putting their swords away. “Lead on, sir. Lead on.”

The soldier raised an eyebrow at her and turned to walk away. He checked to see if she followed. But Amanda did follow him and the fifteen soldiers followed her. A small contingent of the crowd fell into step behind the entourage on their way to the king’s abode. They marched along the dirt streets past the arena where she had killed so many of their people. A concrete-like substance replaced the dirt as they neared a large structure in the middle of the village. As poor as the Bonhar appeared, their ruler lived well. The crowd behind the troop of soldiers and Amanda grew into hundreds as they filed past the gates of the structure. The crowd stopped outside unwilling to risk the displeasure of the garrisoned soldiers within.

They took her into a marble hallway. Slick marble floors, freshly polished, blended into marble walls, columns and ceilings. A covering of gold lined the walls on either side of her. At the end of the hall, two large doors opened into a vast chamber filled with gold, ivory, and silver. At the far end of the chamber, an old man sat on a throne watching the parade march toward him. The soldiers stopped at the steps and knelt in front of the king. Amanda kept her feet. Boljan ignored her insolence.

“What brings you to Bonhar without being called to the arena?” The king’s tone was conversational as if he did not really care to hear the answer to his question. Amanda responded with a question of her own in the same conversational tone, speaking to him as an equal.

“Why do you send assassins to kill your best arena warriors, Boljan?” The old man’s eyes narrowed with anger. He waved away the soldiers and waited for them to leave the chamber, ordering the leader that they should not be disturbed. Amanda watched the retreat of the soldiers with amusement. The doors clanged shut. Amanda turned to the king. “Last night, I was told why I have been made to fight in your arena.” She put her hand on her saber. “Why should I not just kill you

and end this asinine game, Boljan?” Amanda expected Boljan to react in anger. Instead the king laughed.

“You really are your mother’s daughter, aren’t you Uman —, Amanda? I will not call you Umando. That is a legend resurrected by an old fool.” Another voice interrupted.

“She is Umando,” the cracked, old voice said. Amanda turned and saw the shaman walking from the other end of the chamber. Boljan frowned.

“How did you get in here? I left strict instructions that we were not to be disturbed.”

“They know who I am, Brother,” the shaman said, winking at Amanda as he passed her on the way up the steps to Boljan’s side. “They would not dare stop the king’s shaman and brother, no matter how many times you have thrown me in your dungeons.” The shaman laughed. Amanda smiled despite herself.

Boljan’s scowled at him. “What is it you wish, my brother? Or are you here to answer why this woman has been brought to Bonhar without my consent?” The shaman nodded, smiling. The king roared. “Well, what is it then?”

The shaman turned toward Amanda and winked at her again, lighting his pipe. The sweet, heavy smell of his favorite herb filled the chamber. Boljan hissed at him in disgust. “I have brought her here to force you to bring the killing to a close. Our people have paid a heavy price for your games. They were our father’s games before you, I know, but they should cease.”

“It is our way, old fool,” Boljan answered. “The contest is almost over as it is. Now go away and let us get acquainted.” The king waved his hand in dismissal. The shaman ignored him.

“I shall stay, Brother,” the shaman said evenly. “After all, she is my grand niece, and our future leader.”

Boljan’s face reddened. “Whether she is the next leader of Bonhar has yet to be determined.” He glared at her. Amanda

drew back her shoulders, gaining an inch or two of height. “I do not recognize her as kin or as an heir.”

“Why not?” Amanda asked the question as innocently as she could manage. “Much to my dismay, I find that I must recognize you, Grandfather, though not as my king, as you are to Atvar.” Amanda walked slowly up the steps toward the throne. “No, grandfather, I must recognize you as the murderer of my mother and father.” She screamed her contempt at him. Boljan shouted a command. Amanda drew the saber and rushed toward the king, bringing her saber down toward his head. Metal clanged with metal. She looked up and saw Atvar holding his sword against her weapon.

“No, Umundo, this is not the way.” His eyes pleaded with her to desist. She heard the metal doors swing open and the sound of scurrying feet, clamoring up the steps to surround the king. Atvar smiled at her. “We must accept our fate, Umundo.” She gripped her saber, trying to break the hilt.

“Atvar is correct, Umundo,” the shaman whispered in her ear. “Remember the ring your wear on your finger. Remember the crowd that followed you to the castle.”

Atvar nodded slightly to her and mouthed, “I love you.” She smiled at him, softening her grip on the saber. She turned and glared at the king, before bowing and offering him her weapon. Boljan took it from her and stood yelling to the Captain of the Guards.

“Take her away and ready the arena for tonight.” He glared at her and turned and strode behind the throne disappearing through a door leading out of the chamber.

Amanda followed her captors. Atvar walked beside her, occasionally brushing his shoulder with hers. He leaned toward her, whispering. “Trust me, my love. I will never harm you.” She stopped and turned to him.

“I love you, Atvar,” she said, allowing the words and feelings run the gamut in her system. Tears flowed down her face. Someone poked her from behind. Atvar smiled at her then disappeared behind the closed door of the dungeon.

## XII

Sleep evaded her. She could not leave Bonhar on her own, not without the help of the shaman. Amanda paced in her cell watching the sunlight dwindle from the high windows of her cell. “Prepare the arena,” Boljan had said. She knew what and who awaited her in the arena. Memories of the preceding night flooded her mind. She longed for Atvar’s caress. Why had he saved the king from her saber? Didn’t he know what Boljan had in store for them? Boljan intended to repeat his atrocity he had committed on his daughter and her husband with her and Atvar. She doubted she could kill him. Her stomach knotted with anguish.

She refused food when the guard offered. A troop of soldiers, including the older man she met earlier waited for her outside her cell door. “Disrobe,” he told her. Amanda complied, readying herself for the arena. Her father’s ring hung around her neck on the golden chain. Her mother’s ring glistened in the fading sunlight.

They marched through empty halls down an underground corridor that brought them to a room inside the arena. She heard the expectant murmuring of the crowd as she waited to be taken into the arena. A soldier nudged her and she moved forward into the light. Hundreds of torches burned around the circular fighting field. The crowd noticed her and began to cheer her wildly. Something had happened. It was the first time she had recognized the fact that they cheered for her, personally, not for the killing and mayhem of the arena. She had heard them cheer almost as wildly for Atvar. Oh, Atvar, she thought.

She saw movement at the other end of the dirt floor. The crowd continued its adulation of her. Chants of Umado rang through the arena, until Atvar appeared. The cheers died with his appearance. An expectant silence filled the arena as trumpets blared to announce the arrival of Boljan. The old king walked into his box followed by his brother, the shaman.

The shaman glanced around at the crowd, nodding at her as she caught his eye. She understood his message. The Bonhar came for her tonight. Amanda knew what she would do next.

She saw her saber lying on a table underneath the king's box. She strode to the table and picked up the blade. She turned and faced Boljan. "I would challenge you, Grandfather," she yelled. "Come rest your spirit on the point of my blade. Come meet my father whom you killed. Come meet my mother, your daughter, whom you tortured to death in this very place. Let us end this senseless killing with your death, Boljan." The crowd stirred in their seats. Boljan stared down at her, anger evident in his eyes. For a moment, she thought he would take the challenge.

"You have a challenger, Amanda," he said. "Turn to face him for the winner shall succeed me on this throne."

Amanda shuddered. She thought about jumping the wall and killing the old king, but the number of guards around him made that impossible. She turned away from Boljan and looked at Atvar opposite her, his sword held in his right hand. She studied his perfect body as she walked slowly toward her opponent/lover. A small smile came to her as she neared him. Atvar watched her, showing no emotion on his face. He never raised his guard as she walked up to him and gazed in his eyes. *I love him, she thought. This is not right.*

"Umando," Atvar whispered. "Drive your saber through my heart now. I will not fight you. All I ask is that you kill me cleanly." Tears ran down his face. Amanda felt a few of her own as she reached up and caressed his cheek. She swung around toward Boljan, a fierce determination in her eyes. She raised her hands to each side of her face.

"I will not fight Atvar, Boljan," she yelled for the crowd to hear. She heard soft assents from those in the crowd. "I will marry him and share the rule, old man. Or I will die with him on this floor trying to get to you to end your reign of mayhem, Boljan. I will die avenging the death of my mother and father." The crowd erupted in loud cheers. Boljan gave a hand signal and dozens of soldiers entered the arena, surrounding the two warriors. Amanda cast her voice for Atvar alone. "Get in close

to me and back to the wall." She felt the flesh of his hip against hers as they backed away from the advancing soldiers.

She felt for the wooden wall and placed one foot against it and saw Atvar do the same. If she had to die, at least she had one night with him. Amanda studied the faces of the advancing soldiers. She could smell their fear. None of them wanted to be here. Amanda did not wish to kill them, but she would. Most of the advancing warriors cast furtive glances into the crowd above them. Hissing emanated from the crowd as the soldiers advanced. Amanda heard more than a few swords removed from scabbards behind them. Will they come to our aid? She could not count on that.

A command was yelled at the soldiers. They hesitated momentarily, but charged the two naked warriors. Amanda attacked on the hesitation. With feet and saber, three of the men lay on the ground. Small pains rippled through her system. Someone had grazed her, but she was all right. She heard Atvar screaming with rage as he hacked away at the attackers. The crowd screamed in fury at the action. Soldiers broke Atvar and Amanda apart. Two more soldiers went down. She felt a burning in her upper thigh. Amanda knew it was a lost cause. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a mass of soldiers surrounding Atvar. She could not help him.

A massive yell went through the crowd. Amanda felt herself tossed out of the way of the soldiers as others surged to her aid. She glanced around. The walls holding back the crowd were either on the ground in ruins or covered by a mass of people swarming over them into the arena. She caught a flash of yellow hair in the midst of Boljan's soldiers. Amanda screamed and charged, hacking her way to Atvar. Relief flooded her when she realized that he lived. She noticed blood flowing from various parts of his body, but nothing that seemed life threatening.

She beat back the soldiers, giving her room to maneuver. She looked around the arena. Swarms of people surrounded Boljan's soldiers. Atvar and her fight had been taken over by the Bonhar. The king's guards fought valiantly to keep the people from the king's box. Boljan stood sword drawn killing

any who came near him. The shaman stood frowning. Amanda nodded to herself.

“Enough,” she yelled. “Enough. The killing must end here.” Those directly around her stopped fighting, including Boljan’s soldiers. She grabbed Atvar’s hand and led him through the crowd toward the king’s box. Fighting stopped as she approached. All eyes turned to her. She glared at Boljan.

“The senseless killing ends here,” she said to him. “Bonhar needs all of its citizens to prosper.” Boljan stared at her and glanced around the arena and returned his eyes to Amanda. “Grandfather, be gone from here before the sun rises tomorrow morning.” The crowd broke into a loud cheer. Boljan’s shoulders drooped. He looked his age, an old and beaten man, for the first time to Amanda. He retreated from the box with a few of his guards. She saw the shaman smile at her. She nodded at him.

She climbed up the wall with Atvar’s help and then assisted him. She turned to face the crowd. “The arena shall be closed and destroyed,” she said to the crowd. More cheers. Chants broke out of her Bonhar name. She turned to Atvar and studied his wounds. “We must attend to those,” she said. Worry filled her voice.

He smiled at her. “Just as soon as we attend to your wounds Umando.” Pain nagged at her as she realized he was correct.

“You have fulfilled your obligation here, Amanda,” the shaman said to her. “I shall return you to your home if you wish.” He cackled at her, drawing deeply on a freshly lit pipe. The smell of herb filled the air.

Amanda looked at Atvar who smiled at her. She pulled her father’s ring from around her neck and took it from the chain. She grabbed his hand and slipped it on his finger. She smiled at him. “I am home, old fool.” The shaman cackled his response.

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## Not Again

Alan Bruce

“Hey Juan, man. How’d it go?”

Juan, Captain Juan Samuel, entered the tent he shared with his brother officer. “Sammy, it’s good to see you, man. I been havin’ dreams that you died of over eatin’ while me an’ my team baked prairie dust for supper.” His attempt at humour fell flat.

Sammy, or Captain Sam McAdam, to his company, stretched his two metre frame and waved his arm lazily. “Welcome home, Juan. Have a drink. I don’t expect you’ll be called for debriefing for maybe a day ‘r two. The top brass are stirred up like a swarm of angry hornets. I wonder what poor bastard has them so worked up?”

Juan replied, “Don’t bet on it. I’ll be called soon.” He stripped off his sidearm and started to remove the bulky clamshell armour that he wore over top of his uniform. He stared at a scarred piece of the ceramic armour and winced as he poked at the corresponding location on his rib cage. “The folk out there on the prairies got no respect for the EPol, that’s for damn sure.”

“No shit. I never came across anybody who would cross the street to help out the Energy Police,” Sammy replied. “Here, have a beer and tell papa why the brass should care that your balls ‘r back in camp.”

Juan took the proffered bottle and drank half of the contents before sitting down. He held the cold bottle against the back of his neck and stared into the distance. “I’ve hated wasters ever since they dusted off my old man in the energy riots. Now I gave ‘em reason to hate us. That’s probably why the brass are so stirred up. They’re busy tryin’ to decide whether to bust my ass, or make me a hero. Wanna bet that

they make me a hero? Do people still cheer heroes? I ain't been cheered once since I signed up with the EPol."

"Come on. We're doing important work. Where would everyone be without us? Dead. So, what's eating you, and why should the brass care?"

Juan drank the rest of his beer. He put the empty bottle down on top of the empty air conditioning case they used as a coffee table. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yeah. What went wrong out there? You've got to tell me. It could be my ass on the line the next time."

Juan ignored the implied question. "I'm going to put in for a transfer. I been out here on the prairies for seven years. Let some snot nosed brat take my place while I sit in a comfy command chair and watch the meters for a change."

"You don't mean that. You're too good line officer. The brass were smart to turn down your transfer request. Besides, they'll put a newlie in charge of your men. How long would your men survive if a damn newlie lieutenant took them out in the field?"

Juan whispered, "They wouldn't make it back. Damn it man, why didn't they let me go? If the brass had approved my transfer, none of this would have happened?"

"That's not what you want, I been where you are right now. I've pulled a few boners of my own. Tell me what happened. You need to get it off your chest. If you go to the brigade shrink he'll redline you. You don't want that."

Juan sat still, staring off into space. He was silent for so long that Sam had risen to go for the brigade shrink. "Sit down, Sammy. I'll talk. Who knows maybe the brass will transfer me. Maybe they'll make me a hero and transfer me some place where they can be damned sure that I don't—"

Juan drew a few deep breaths and resumed speaking. "It was supposed to be a straight forward mission. We were supposed to go in, assess the size of a petroleum find, and get out. The town was listed as abandoned, but the SatRec

reported that there was a local presence. Hell, we're paramilitary. We can take care of ourselves.

"We got dropped off in the middle of nowhere and we spent two days humping our supplies through to the target area. I remember being told that the plan was to surprise the locals. They told me that no one would expect the EPol to come in out of nowhere. They got one thing right; we were in nowhere. Two days of humping supplies in that heat. Damn, but I was wishing for winter. We coulda skied in easier."

"Where'd they send you?"

"Who gives a shit?"

Sam spoke calmly, "It's okay. It don't mean nothin'."

Juan clenched and unclenched his fists several times. Finally he regained control and continued on. "In the briefing, the science boys told us that they had detected traces of hydrocarbons with the last SatRec. They wanted it checked out. I asked 'em to explain how they could tell the difference between burning gas and someone suffering from a bad batch of chilli. I think that remark made 'em decide to have us walk half way across the God damned prairie. I won't shoot my mouth off like that again."

Sam was holding himself and rocking back and forth. He had his face turned away from his friend. Juan burst out, "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Sam burst out laughing. "I can't help it. The more that I think about you asking the propeller heads about detecting farts the funnier it becomes. Oh man, I wish I could have been there. The look on their faces would have been worth a two day hike."

Even Juan smiled for a moment. He got up, pulled a couple more bottles of beer from the cooler, and handed one to his friend. "Yeah, that's what I thought at the time. You remember hearing about places that prepared themselves against raider attack?"

Sam replied, "You mean like towns arming themselves, and such, back before the petroleum ban?"

“Not really. Almost every town collected arms to fight off raiders and mobs. Some towns went a lot further. The town we hiked out to was one of those places. This town went a lot further than simply arming the townspeople. This place had been prepared so that the town could hold off damn near all comers except for pros, like us. There were bunkers, pillboxes, and what I took to be a minefield. There was barbed wire, tangled up so that anyone attacking would be herded into the minefield or caught in the crossfire from the pillboxes. Man, oh man, when I saw the place I thought my number had been called.”

“Did the squatters have any lookouts or spotters posted?”

“No, it was absolutely quiet. I was sure that they knew we were there, and I was sure that they wanted us to make the first move. Now I know that is what the—”

Sam cut in, “Take it easy Juan. It’s over. You made it.”

“Yeah. Don’t mean nothin’. Anyhow, I was worried. I had the mortar team set up and lob shots into the area I thought of as a minefield. The first shot that landed told me that I had guessed right. I had them lob in enough shots to clear us a pretty good space. Poor way to clear a minefield, but I didn’t see that I had much choice in the matter. After a bit I had them relocate behind a low ridge 45 degrees to our left. I sent the recoilless team over there with ‘em for good measure. I figured the ridge top would give ‘em a great line of site. It did. The team was able to place shots in at least two of the pillboxes.”

Sam commented, “Sounds like you had everything going your way.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. The situation went from put your dick in the meat grinder, to a cakewalk. The rest of us went in quick. The mortar team had managed to blast a space through one section of the barbed wire. In an hour we went through the whole place and took out every pillbox and bunker. We mostly used grenades lobbed in through firing slits, an’ such. The site was well prepared but it wasn’t meant to stand up against pros like us.”

“So, the problems must have started afterwards?”

Juan nodded and clenched his hands around the empty beer bottle that he held. “Yeah. I kept the mortar team and recoilless teams out of the site; just in case. We had the place to ourselves, so I assigned locations and had the team search the entire town site. We found evidence that the place had been abandoned for years, and only recently, people had settled there again. There were three fuel storage tanks that were each at least half full. It was quite a find and I no longer minded the fact that we had hiked for two days. That is, I didn’t mind ‘till Szpac found the bodies.

“That’s when things fell into the pot. It seems that whoever was occupying the village had placed their kids in one of the pillboxes when they lit out. There were ten bodies. The oldest was that of a girl. She couldn’t have been more than twelve.”

Sam paled, “Oh shit.”

“Right. My numbed brain slowly realised what this meant. I signaled the men to get ready to move out. Too late. Almost instantly, Szpac was dropped with a bullet through his brain. I tried to call up the mortar team. They didn’t respond. Neither did the recoilless team. Seconds later the squatters started dropping mortar shells on our position. They started using the recoilless against us several minutes later.”

Juan rocked back and forth in his chair. His eyes were tightly closed. “I’m gonna be court martialled for this. I shoulda scouted the whole perimeter before going in. I shoulda known better. I assumed that anyone with that type of fortification would dig in. Damn it, I expected locals. I didn’t expect guerrilla tactics.”

Sam replied, “None of us would have. We’re only paramilitary. We’re not supposed to face any trained opposition. Command sends in the military if there’s gonna be any serious fighting. Who—”

“Back in the briefing I was told that I didn’t want to know who was backing the mission.”

“Damn.”

Juan continued, “We dug in and I sent a couple of men off to get some jerry cans of fuel. I figured to leave a surprise for the bastards. We sloshed fuel around three of the pillboxes including the one with the kids in it. Then we rigged booby traps with some of our remaining grenades strapped to full jerry cans. I figured the least I could do was leave ‘em with a couple of home-made bunker busters. I had a few men continue firing while the rest of the men fell back to the main fuel tanks. I rigged a final surprise at the main tanks and then we faded out.”

“You’re crazy.”

“We were lucky. If they had surrounded us before opening up with the mortar then we would have been finished.”

“They showed their inexperience.”

Juan replied, “Yeah, but they were good enough to trick us. Anyhow, we fell back and holed up back of the town site where we had a good line of fire, if need be. Then I had the men sit tight. I figured that if we stopped firing the squatters would become curious. They would have to come into town. It didn’t take long before the mortar fell silent. From our position we could hear them yelling and laughing as they came down the ridge and into town.”

“And?”

“Not much more to tell. They triggered the booby traps in two of the pillboxes. I had the men circle around the village. I set their goal as a creek about three miles back from the town. I kept three men with me as a burial detail. I figured to bury our guys from the mortar team and the recoilless team. There was no way I was leavin’ them for the coyotes.”

“You took quite a chance didn’t you? What was to stop the rest of the squatters from coming after you?”

“No. I didn’t figure on there being many squatters left after setting off the booby traps. There was none left after I blew the damn fuel tanks.”

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## Hecharawa

Shawn James

The creature ran soundlessly through the trees, dodging and leaping gnarled branches with the ease of a great cat. Deep in its broad chest its breath rumbled like summer thunder. It was famished after its long sleep, consumed by a hunger that left its great muscles twitching with anticipation, but soon it would feast again. It could scent its prey in the breeze ruffling the leaves.

The forest opened on the banks of a wide river. The creature paused and sniffed at a curious smell that hung in the humid air. It crept down the sandy bank to the water's edge and sniffed again, then jumped back, its long snout wrinkling in disgust. During the last awakening the river had been clear and odourless; now it was a muddy brown and smelled of... *kryaka*, the stench of death. A cough erupted from its muscular throat as it bounded up the bank and began running again, following the path that instinct ordered through brambles and thickets. From ancient days the people had made their summer camp by the big water at the mouth of the river, and there the creature always went to feast at the awakening. The people had called the creature many names through the ages. To the Huron, who had dwelt on the land during its last awakening, he had been the Beast in the Trees; to the Marakarois before them, the Hunter; and to the Cerouks, the first people to find its killing grounds, he had been *Hecharawa*, the Eater of Souls.

It made the dry, raspy sound in its throat that passed for laughter. *Hecharawa*. That was still its favourite.

When the river made a final turn before reaching the big water, the *Hecharawa* re-entered the forest and slowed to a trot. Close now; the scent was so enticing that saliva dripped from its razor-sharp teeth. Another cough, deeper and wetter

than the last, erupted from its throat. It skulked up to the edge of the trees and hunkered down on its powerful haunches. The sunlight beyond the trees was blinding after the forest gloom and the long, silent darkness of its den. It let its pupilless eyes adjust to the brightness, then peered into the heart of the killing grounds by the shores of the big water.

A tiny grunt of surprise escaped its long snout. There were no dwellings of skin, no dark-haired women working by cook fires or grim-faced men standing guard with their pitiful spears. Instead, lofty mountains of stone, their sides sheer and flat like sheets of shale, rose from the earth. Clouds of black smoke billowed from their summits, turning the sky above them a dark and dirty grey. A great bird, larger even than the winged beasts it had seen when the world was young, glided through the air on rigid wings, roaring with a power that hurt the creature's ears. Most startling of all were the throngs of people. Like busy ants they swarmed over the sheet of flat, black rock that covered the earth, scurrying in and out of the mountains, rushing back and forth between the big water and the river, yelling, laughing, screaming, breathing. Waves of heat shimmered over the entire scene, making the world seem hazy and surreal.

The *Hecharawa* stepped back into the shadows. What had happened to the small groups of skin dwellings huddled by the water? Where were the tilled fields? The racks of flayed fish drying in the hot sun? It sniffed the air and coughed; thick runners of mucous sprayed from its nostrils. The scent of blood was heady, but the air was malodorous, disturbing.

One of the humans approached the edge of the trees and sat down on a long rectangular rock. Its hair was the same shade as corn silk at harvest, as was the strange hair on its face, and it wore curious garments, skins that were smooth and woven with many colours and pierced with shiny round objects down the front. The human put a white stick in its mouth, then made fire appear in its hand and touched it to the end of the stick. Bluish-grey smoke began to curl up from the stick, and the human blew more smoke from its mouth.

Rivers of snot flowed from the *Hecharawa*'s nose and dripped in stringy globs to the forest floor. All was strange here. It wanted to slink back to its den where it was quiet and dark and the world did not reek of smoke and *kryaka*, but it was too hungry to return without feeding on at least one of the humans. Slowly it crept up behind the human, then rose up on its hind legs until it towered over the smoking beast. A string of wet coughs erupted from its chest, and the creature turned and jumped to its feet, screaming. Before it could use its magic fire, the *Hecharawa* brought one of its great claws down upon the human's head. The first blow split open its skull; the second split the head into two halves down to the collar bone. The human dropped to the black rock in a spray of blood, and the *Hecharawa* dragged it into the trees.

It shoved its snout deep into the wound and sucked mouthful after mouthful of blood into its gullet, then ate the brain, the eyes, and the skin and muscle tissue off both halves of the human's head. It had just begun to feast on the neck when its stomach spasmed and the blood and gore spewed back out, painting the trees and dead pine needles on the forest floor a frothy red. It stood staring at its vomit for a moment, amazed and afraid for the first time in its long life, then the taste in its mouth became sour, like the taste of flesh that had baked too long in the hot sun, and it dropped to the ground, gagging, and retched again.

The human was *kryaka*. This *world* was *kryaka*.

It heard voices coming towards it and cringed against a tree. More of the evil humans; the stench of their fetid flesh burned in its nostrils like the smoky air. If they found it here in its weakened state they might use the magic fire against it—and perhaps this new and terrifying world had even deadlier weapons at its disposal. It crawled away as the first of the humans entered the trees.

The *Hecharawa* heard their screams of revulsion, branches and twigs snapping as they fled from the gruesome sight, but it did not return for its meal. After it had vomited again it was able to get up. It felt weak and unsteady as it followed its own trail back to its den. Its snout was clotted with blood and its

own snot, its breath raspy and wet in its great chest, and the pain in its stomach was agonizing, like it had swallowed a human whole and the beast was alive inside it, trying to claw its way out. As it left the bank of the dirty river its lungs seized in its chest and it fell to the earth and convulsed itself into unconsciousness.

When the *Hecharawa* woke the sun was setting on the far side of the river. It dragged itself back into the forest, unable to get up but desperate to hide from the heat and poison of this world in the cold, familiar darkness. At the mouth of its den it retched again, and this time there was darker, thicker blood in the vomit. Its lungs crackled with moisture as it crawled inside and collapsed amid the bones of ancient feasts strewn over the dusty floor and drifted into strange dreams, while the stench of *kryaka* grew in its nostrils until it could smell nothing else.

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## Princess Tadpole

Megan Powell

Once upon a time, in a land very far away from here, there lived a King and a Queen. Being King and Queen, they of course lived in a castle and, while this castle was a bit short on amenities like indoor plumbing and climate control, it was considered quite picturesque. The King and Queen were happy to live there, and their subjects were happy to think of their King and Queen doing whatever Kings and Queens do in such a fine castle.

After some number of years, the King and Queen began to feel that something was missing from their lives. True, they enjoyed ruling their kingdom, which they did with more than a little skill and fairness. But, well, when one is a King or Queen, it can be very difficult to have friends. A real friend will tell you if you sit in strawberry jam while wearing white silk. Courtiers and peasants...well, there is always the thought that, perhaps, pointing out the stain might cause offense; or that, perhaps, for some reason unknown to the lower classes, strawberry jam stains are suddenly in fashion. The King and Queen might have been able to be friends with other monarchs (they were not the sort to go to war over strawberry jam) but all the other Kings and Queens lived far away, and had to spend most of their time ruling their own kingdoms.

And so it was that, despite their love for one another and the more remote love of their subjects, the King and Queen grew lonely. They wished for someone who could love them for their True Selves. As everyone knows, only children have the honesty and clarity of vision to do so. And so the King and Queen decided to have a baby.

Now, the King and Queen were just like ordinary people, even if they did wear crowns, and they went about having a baby in the ordinary way, which you'll learn about when

you're older. Suffice to say that, soon after they decided to have a baby, the Queen became pregnant and after nine months gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

Everyone was very happy. Don't think that this is a case where the King was disappointed that the baby wasn't a boy. He, no less than his wife, was looking forward to buying fine clothing and beautiful trinkets and dressing up his daughter. Of course, since this was a medieval kingdom, the King didn't know that his biological contribution had determined the sex of his child, but he probably would have been very happy if he had known.

This is where it gets a little bit sad. After a few days, when the Queen was finally recovering from labor (which had been very difficult, because in those days even Queens couldn't have epidurals) and the King was finally seeing ambassadors once again, they began to realize that their work was only beginning. For, although she was a princess, the baby was a perfectly ordinary baby. She would cry when she was hungry; she would cry when her diaper needed to be changed; she would cry when she couldn't get to sleep; and she would sometimes cry for no apparent reason, and nothing her parents or anyone else could do would make her happy.

This is a difficult enough thing for normal parents to deal with. But the King and Queen, being King and Queen, were very important individuals. They had to meet with people and sign documents and make all sorts of important decisions. As they soon learned, it is not really a good idea to interrupt trade negotiations to change the baby's diaper. Ambassadors might think it's cute at first, but after the third or fourth time they suspect that they are being insulted.

But the King and Queen, being King and Queen, had resources unavailable to most parents. They had all the servants they could ever want. And so they summoned wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards, all to insure that their daughter wanted for nothing.

The wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards were all very good at their respective jobs, and kept the princess fed and healthy and clothed and

entertained. They all agreed that she was a very good, very adorable baby. (And, they all hastened to assure one another, they weren't just being polite when they said that, like they were when talking about *some* of the nobles' children.)

It seemed that things were going quite well, but after a time the King and Queen began to miss their baby. Oh, they saw the princess a great deal, but always when she was fed and dry and not crying. She was a delightful baby, but they realized that part of what made her so delightful was how dreadful she could be when she was unhappy. While it was very nice to see a baby who was happy, there was something to be said for being the person who took an unhappy baby and made her happy once more. The King and Queen had not realized that they would be depriving themselves of this joyful experience, but they were thankful that they realized it in time to do something about it.

And so they sent away the wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards, with their thanks. The wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards were sorry to leave, since the King and Queen had paid them quite handsomely, and the little princess really was quite delightful. But they understood that parents might want to spend more time with their daughter. In fact, they considered it quite admirable. There were, of course, more than a few Kings and Queens who thought nothing of fostering their children with other families, or sending them away to the very best schools. These Kings and Queens weren't bad people, for the most part, but they also didn't know or think much about their children until it was time to name an heir. At that point, when it was much too late to do anything about it, they would have to decide whether they thought their children deserved to rule the kingdom, or whether they were unworthy and needed to be banished. The wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards knew, as most of the King and Queen's subjects did, that children who turned out badly and were ignored until it was too late caused nothing but strife. They were quite pleased that *their* King and Queen took a personal interest in the development of the princess.

So there were changes made, and schedules modified, and some of the courtiers took on additional responsibilities. It took a bit of getting used to, but everyone adjusted and the kingdom ran just about as well as before the King and Queen decided to devote more of their time to the princess, which only proves that if you put your mind to something and can convince your subjects you are serious and they may as well help, you can accomplish quite a lot.

Life continued quite happily for some time, and human nature dictates that hearing about other peoples' happy times is somewhat boring, so we won't spend much time on it. Instead, we'll talk about the King and Queen's servants and the things they said.

Now, the King and Queen had dismissed the wetnurses and nursemaids and dressmakers and toymakers and bards, but they were still the King and Queen, and they did live in a castle, which meant that they still had a big staff. There were servants in the kitchen and servants in the stables, servants who guarded the castle and servants who helped the King and Queen get dressed. (This is not to say that they were too stupid to dress themselves, though back in those days clothing did have a lot more drawstrings and ties and buttons in funny places, but when you are a King or Queen people expect that you will need lots of extra people to do very simple things. It doesn't really make sense.)

So the castle was certainly not deserted. But every time the princess cried, the King or Queen (and often both) would leap up and go take care of her. It wasn't that they didn't trust their servants, they just wanted to take care of the baby themselves. They were very kind employers, and their servants were quite fond of their work in the castle. (Well, in all honesty, like most people they would probably have preferred to spend their days sitting on a beach somewhere; but if you take it as a given that they had to work for a living, working in the castle was generally considered a great job if you could get it.) But one of the things that servants do is gossip (it seems to be in the contract somewhere) and how could they not gossip about the baby? She was, after all, the heir to the kingdom, and the King and Queen doted on her and spent so much time with her that

it was impossible to gossip about *them* without talking about the princess, too.

Now the thing about real life is that it tends to be pretty boring. But boring gossip isn't really gossip. Gossip needs to be interesting, so that for a few minutes the gossips don't have to think about their own boring lives. So, by its very nature, gossip has to be...well, it doesn't have to be a *lie*, but it does have to be *speculative*. *Wouldn't it be interesting if...?* And of course, after a few people have repeated the story to their friends, *Wouldn't it be interesting if...?* becomes *Isn't it interesting that...?* and, eventually, *Isn't it scandalous that...!*

That little segue is just to reassure you that the King and Queen didn't have nasty, malicious servants, but just plain ordinary people working for them. Nobody sat down and said *We need to discredit the King and Queen* or *I think it would be fun if the princess were disinherited* or *Down with the monarchy, peasants unite!* You see, something like that would be far too interesting, and the whole point is that peoples' lives are basically boring and that's why they need gossip, which is what started all the trouble in the first place.

Now, the servants at first approved of the King and Queen's devotion to their daughter. Many of them were parents themselves; and the King and Queen were, metaphorically, the parents of the kingdom, so their devotion was generally considered a sign that the kingdom was in good hands. But after a while, the servants thought it was a little strange. Why did the King and Queen always want to be the ones to feed her? Why did they always have to bathe her? Why did they always want to be the ones to change the princess's diapers? (Again, many of the servants were parents themselves, so they knew that these activities, though they might seem interesting the first time, very quickly became a chore. If *they* had had the option of ordering someone to change their children's diapers, wouldn't they have done so?)

So at first, the servants wondered if the King and Queen didn't trust them. Then they wondered if something was wrong with the baby. After talking amongst themselves, they began talking to their families and friends. No one ever saw

the princess unless she was in the arms of the King or Queen. Whenever the princess appeared in public, she wore royal finery, embroidered dresses so long that they trailed along the ground. No one except the King and Queen ever saw the baby naked.

The princess was a puppet! The princess was a snake, with no arms or legs and scales all over her body and a forked tongue! The princess was a wolfling, all covered with fur, except for her face! (Because, of course, the King and Queen shaved her every morning.) The princess was a changeling, a fairy child left in place of the *real* princess, who had been taken wherever fairies take the babies they steal! The princess was a demon, who held the King and Queen in thrall and each night demanded that they sacrifice a young virgin and feed her the girl's raw heart!

These stories continued, and spread. They grew more and more outrageous, because except for the castle staff and some courtiers and visiting ambassadors, no one in the kingdom had ever seen the princess, even from a distance. Eventually, the nobles began to hear these stories, and they got a little nervous. This is not to say that they believed that the princess was anything other than a normal baby (although some of them did), but they did worry about the mood among the peasants. Just because they didn't have public relations firms doesn't mean that they weren't smart enough to know that there were more peasants than nobles, and that if the peasants got *really* upset (if, for instance, they thought that the heir apparent intended to eat the roasted flesh of their children) then things could get very bad.

But the nobles couldn't really say anything to the King and Queen. Remember the strawberry jam? Well, there are things that are even more difficult to work into conversation. *So, Your Majesty, is it true that your daughter sheds her skin once a week? So, Your Grace, do you find it annoying when the princess howls and runs wild with the full moon, and do you think that will hurt her marriage prospects? So, My Lord, do you think that the princess's insistence upon feasting on virgins might encourage immoral behavior among the peasants?*

So the nobles didn't say any of that. They said other things. *So, Your Majesty, when do you think you will have another child? Just in case, god forbid, something should happen to your daughter, the line of succession should be clear: you know, "an heir and a spare"? Because, nothing against your brother, but, well, he's not really the right sort to rule this kingdom—and don't even get me started on those bratty children of his.... So, Your Grace, do you think that you might have a boy next time? Not that we are at all chauvinistic ourselves, or have any doubt that your lovely daughter will grow into a lovely young woman, and have suitors falling all over one another...but still, there are the traditionalists to contend with.... So, My Lord, I've found an astrologer, wonderful woman, and she assures me that children born one year from now will be destined for unimaginable greatness. If you and the Queen start again, say next month, you'll have an excellent chance of having a child born under very favorable stars....*

The King and Queen were somewhat mystified by this sudden resurgence in interest. There are always a few people who will insist on asking couples when they plan to have their next baby, no matter how many children they already have, even if the couple in question aren't royalty. But suddenly *everyone* was asking. Being parents, the King and Queen's next reaction was fear. What if they *did* need a spare? Was something wrong with the baby? Could she be ill? They summoned doctors, who assured them that the princess was a perfectly healthy child. What, then, was the matter?

But nobody told them about the rumors. And none of the nobles thought to make the argument that would have convinced the King and Queen to have another baby: *So, Your Majesty, perhaps the little girl could use a brother or sister. It can be hard growing up as royalty, you become isolated, and your friends' parents are all worried that their children might throw a rock at the heir and get the whole family executed. I know you always say your brother was your closest friend growing up....* After a time, the nobles stopped mentioning another baby; if the King and Queen hadn't gotten the

message, there was no point in annoying them (and it was becoming apparent that their patience was growing thin).

So the rumors continued, and though they didn't grow much more outrageous (since it was now accepted fact that the princess was some sort of hideous creature, it wasn't as interesting as it had once been) they didn't go away either. (Well, the puppet story died. It wasn't nearly as interesting as the other theories. *Anybody* could make a puppet.) Eventually it got to the point where people wouldn't have believed the truth even if someone stripped the princess naked and let them examine her for themselves. In fact, that would probably have been counterproductive: only a *very powerful* supernatural creature could make herself look *exactly* like a human child.

As the princess grew from a normal, healthy baby into a normal, healthy child, she came to love the gardens around the castle. The gardener was a gnarled old man, who looked quite ferocious but, once you got to know him, he proved himself to be delightfully kind (provided, of course, that you liked plants). The princess did like plants, and the gardener thought she was a charming child. He even took her into some of the little parts of the garden where visitors seldom went. They weren't *hidden*, precisely; but if you followed the stone paths, or took the normal route through the maze, you wouldn't find them. You'd only find them if you were an explorer, or if the gardener showed you himself.

In those places, he had little trees, no more than a few inches high. He wrapped bits of wire around the trees to stunt their growth and control the shape of their limbs, so a tree that could fit in the palm of your hand looked like the greatest oak in the forest. The princess thought the gnarled little trees looked sort of like the gnarled little gardener. She was delighted by the miniature trees, and privately resolved that one day she, too, would learn the craft of wrapping them with wire, and produce such masterful works of art as the gardener did.

Once she learned of these special places in the garden, the princess would often play among the tiny trees. One day, she met a boy there. He was about her age, and the nephew of the

gardener. (Well, he wasn't actually the gardener's nephew. He was a grand-nephew or some such; the genetic relationship was hazy, but he called the gardener "uncle" all the same.) The two children played together for a time.

"I love it here," the princess said, and her playmate nodded.

"When I grow up, I'm going to be a gardener, just like my uncle."

The princess was awed that the *gardener* was this boy's uncle. It might seem strange, but she didn't consider it at all impressive to have a King for a father and a Queen for a mother. Why should she? They had been her parents for her whole life, and she didn't know anything different.

"I want to learn how to make little trees like this," the princess confided, and that was when the conversation began to go downhill. The boy wasn't sure, but he didn't think girls were clever enough. He didn't think his uncle would teach her, and how else would she learn? Well, you can fill in the rest.

"He will teach me," the princess said, close to tears at the thought of not being taught such a beautiful art. "He will teach me, because I love it, and he thinks I'm a nice girl. And if he doesn't want to, I'll go to my parents, and they'll *make* him teach me, because they're the King and Queen."

Now an adult would have gone pale, and stammered an apology, and probably prostrated himself before the kingdom's heir. But remember what we said about the honesty of children?

"They aren't really your parents," the boy said. "You're not really a princess."

The princess couldn't think of any reply to that.

"You're a monster, a freak. Everybody knows," the boy said, voice low. Because, whenever he heard adults talk about the princess, they always spoke in low, quite tones, so he just assumed that was what you were supposed to do.

"I'm not a monster."

“Yes you are. The fairies kidnapped the *real* princess from her cradle, and left you in her place. When you were little, you didn’t have any arms or legs.”

“I do so have arms and legs!”

“Now you do. But haven’t you ever seen a tadpole? They don’t have arms or legs, either, but they grow up to be frogs, don’t they?”

“You’re a horrible liar!” the princess cried, and ran away.

She was very quiet that night over dinner. The King and Queen noticed, but they didn’t say anything. They knew that everyone, including their daughter, sometimes had quiet moods.

The princess couldn’t bring herself to say anything to her parents. She *knew* the boy had been lying. She wasn’t a frog, she was a person. And fairies were just make-believe.

But. Just suppose. Just suppose she asked them, and all of a sudden they looked sort of sad and said yes, we did have a little girl who was stolen, but the fairies left you so we thought, why not raise this thing? We can always have another real baby later.

And so she stayed silent for the next day, and the next. The King and Queen decided that she wasn’t simply being quiet, that she was truly upset, and they tried to convince her to tell them what was wrong. She resisted, of course, and spent a few days assuring them she was “Fine,” that it was “Nothing.” But finally one evening, she gathered up her courage.

“Am I really your daughter?”

Well, the King and Queen had not been expecting *that*.

“Of course you are, sweetie.”

“I’m not a monster? I’ve always had arms and legs?”

“Of course you’re not a monster. Who has been telling you such tales?”

Eventually they coaxed the entire story out of her, and were appalled. Because, while they were isolated from their

subjects and had been unaware of the rumors, they were intelligent. They knew that a tale of this sort must have spread far and wide.

So they went to the gardener's family, and they talked to the gardener and the boy and the boy's parents. This of course sounds much easier than it actually was. The King and Queen, being kind and reasonable people, thought that while perhaps the boy deserved to be punished for his cruelty—being sent to bed without supper or some such—he certainly had committed no great crime. The boy's parents, after wailing and apologizing and begging for mercy, were repeatedly assured that the boy was in no danger. At that point, the boy's parents offered to severely discipline the boy for his insult, to make sure that he never behaved in such an offensive manner again....

This continued for some time. By the end, the boy was crying and the gardener was sitting in a corner, thoroughly disgusted by his relatives' behavior and his monarchs' inability to keep informed about the most basic gossip. Eventually, the King and Queen spoke directly to the boy, and established that tales of the princess's malformation were widespread.

What to do? They could not deny the rumors, because after this long, no amount of proof would convince people that the princess was not in fact some hideous creature. Besides, acknowledging the gossip would simply cause it to flare up once more. Never would their daughter be free of these ugly tales.

The King and Queen thought long and hard, and pondered this problem for days. Eventually they came to a decision, beautiful in its simplicity, admirable for its symmetry.

“You know that it is wrong to lie,” the Queen began, and the princess nodded.

“But you also remember the pageant you were in last winter, when you pretended to be someone else?” the King said, and the princess nodded again. “That is acting, not lying.”

“It is very important for a princess to be able to act,” the Queen added. “And you can act without saying anything at all.”

“But we had to memorize all those lines,” the princess protested. “They told us that everyone had to say what they were supposed to say *exactly right*, or everything would be ruined—”

“Pageants are different from real life,” the Queen explained. And then they taught the princess how to smile.

It sounds silly, doesn’t it? How could a normal, healthy, usually happy child not know how to smile? Of course, she did know how to smile, but the King and Queen taught her a *special* smile. The princess practiced in front of them, and then she practiced in front of a mirror, and soon she had perfected the expression. It was a smile of complete serenity, with just a hint of some secret depth. It was a beatific expression, which left the observer with no doubt that whatever statement had just been made was the absolute truth, and not at all disturbing.

And after another few weeks, with the help of the gardener’s family and a few others, a different story began to circulate among the gossips. But this one was about the Queen.

When the Queen was a young girl, you see, she had also spent a lot of time playing outside in the gardens, and one day she saw a frog in one of the ornamental fountains. Now, although she was a princess, she was also a little girl, and she liked to pick up slimy things whenever the opportunity presented itself. So she picked up the frog and kissed it.

And then, suddenly, the frog transformed into a boy! Not just any boy, but a prince. He wore fine clothes and a gold circlet on his head.

“Thank you for freeing me from that wicked curse,” he said.

And, in the fullness of time, that prince married that princess, and they ruled together as King and Queen. But, as everyone knows, curses are funny things. This one didn’t

disappear completely. Any child sired by the King would be born without arms or legs, like a tadpole. But just as tadpoles grow up to be frogs, so the child would grow arms and legs.

Well, of course. As the story spread, it began to make more and more sense. *Of course* the princess hadn't been born with arms and legs. Why, to suggest such a thing was to accuse the Queen of adultery! And who could blame the King and Queen for keeping quiet about the whole thing? After all, there are prejudiced people out there, who might hold it against a man if he'd been turned into a frog at one point in his life.

And so the story spread and occasionally (but not often, because princesses grow up to be Queens) someone would ask the princess, in hushed tones, if the story was true. The princess would smile her special smile, and go on her way. And when the King and Queen had another baby, they were very careful to keep the child tightly swaddled, so no one could see that she had been born with arms and legs.

*For Audrey*

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## Señor Sanchez

Daniel A. Olivas

Señor Sanchez lived a rather nice life in our little pueblo of Dos Cuentos. He sat most days in the Plaza, by the statue of our pueblo's founder, Don Antonio Segoviano, and waited, eyes closed, lips pursed in a constant little hum, with his dog Chucho panting by his side. You see, people came to him to hear him talk. They paid a few pesos, dropping them noisily into an empty Maxwell House tin that sat between Señor Sanchez and Chucho. With each clank of the heavy coins, Chucho's ratty little ears would pop up, frisky and alert, and Señor Sanchez would smile as he leaned back into the weather-beaten fold-out chair. He held his elegant, unusually small hands draped over the brass head of his cane, and he laughed with the same question: "What is it you want to hear?"

And the customers would tell him.

"A sad story," said Señora Cruz, a widow for these last ten years.

"A very funny joke," offered our priest, Padre Olivares. And he tipped his shaggy head into Señor Sanchez. "One I can tell in my sermon next Sunday," he smiled.

"Will I ever find a wife?" asked poor, fat Simón, the carpenter.

One day, the Mayor visited Señor Sanchez. I sat not far away, at the Bar Americano, drinking my usual lunch of two (or perhaps three) bottles of Tecate beer, and I listened to what the great man wanted. No noise came from the Maxwell House tin: the Mayor dropped a nice, fat wad of paper bills into the till. The sun hit my face, hard and true, and I put my cool bottle down with a little clink and waited for Señor Sanchez to ask his usual question. But he did not. What did he

do? He smiled. That is all. And Chucho slept. The Mayor stood, frozen, for a moment or two. And then he spoke.

“Speak to me as my son would,” he said. “If he were still alive.”

My heart beat hard in my throat. The whole pueblo knew of the horrible tragedy of Mario’s death in April, three months ago. It had rained so hard for six days. No one ventured out. Finally, on a Sunday, in the afternoon on the sixth day, the sun peeked out from behind the dark clouds. Some of us went out to inspect the roads and it’s there that we found him, head deep in muddy water, by the side of Calle Verdad. Mario’s body was so bloated we assumed that he had been dead for several days. And, of course, it was clearly an accident. The Mayor fell into a dark sadness at the loss of his only child.

So, on that day the Mayor went to Señor Sanchez, I tried to listen. He smiled at the Mayor and then I saw his lips move slowly. I strained and strained but could not discern a word. Señor Sanchez’s thin, almost blue lips stopped as fast as they had started. The Mayor jumped back as if a large, brutal man had struck him in the chest. And for a moment, the birds did not sing, and the wind did not blow. I glanced at my watch and noted that the Mayor did not move for a full three minutes! Finally, the Mayor straightened himself, brushed off non-existent dust from his fine, blue suit, bowed, slowly and elegantly, and turned on his heel. Within a few seconds, he was out of view.

The odd thing was what happened afterward. When the Mayor left the Plaza, Señor Sanchez sighed and shook his head. Slowly he stood, folded his chair, patted Chucho’s head, and wandered off. Chucho, for some odd reason, stayed put. As he walked away, Señor Sanchez turned, ever so slowly, and caught my eye. In my embarrassment, I waved and then turned to my newspaper. He disappeared within a few moments.

Señor Sanchez never came to the Plaza after that. A month later, we learned that he had died in his bed. Padre Olivares said that he lived to be one hundred and twenty-five, according to the Church’s baptism records. And, according to some of the older citizens, Señor Sanchez had been talking, in the

Plaza, since he was twenty years old. That is a long time to be speaking. No?

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## Perfect Alibis

Stephen D. Rogers

Doctor Hornwager may have killed his boss, but unfortunately I don't think I can prove it in court.

At the time Doctor Smith was murdered, Hornwager was addressing the joint houses of Congress on the benefits of time travel. Vote one way, and then go back in time and vote the other way—please all your constituents.

He was also seen on live television as part of a guest panel discussing the ethical uses of science. While the show earned a poor market share, there is no doubt that many people saw him debating “eminent domain” during the time of the murder.

He also spent the time in question at a high-stakes poker game with none other than my boss—the chief of police—as well as several local politicians. While people expected government officials to be liars and crooks, juries tended to believe them when they were on the stand.

It was enough to drive an honest cop crazy.

Any one of these alibis would keep Hornwager from getting convicted, and he had all three. On top of that, I feared the existence of contradictory but irrefutable alibis would confuse the jury enough that they had a reasonable doubt.

I think Hornwager protected himself too much, that once he proved that he could provide an ironclad alibi that he couldn't stop himself from committing overkill. That's all I have, that and a gut instinct.

The chief wants quick results or the case will be back-burnered.

The district attorney's office wants undeniable physical evidence before they proceed, and I don't have any.

(Actually, I have a vague feeling that I keep finding physical evidence, the existence of which is subsequently erased. If in fact evidence has been lifted through some trick of time travel, I think I wouldn't have the slightest memory of it at all. That being so, I guess the vague feelings are simply the result of too little sleep.)

Sometimes, people who should be punished slip through a crack in the system. That fact never bothered me more than this murder, the way Hornwager appears to be thumbing his nose at us. If he's guilty, I want him to answer for it.

I say "if" because the one thing that keeps me from being dead certain about Hornwager is that time travel offers him the opportunity of the perfect crime. All he has to do is to go back a hundred years to kill some distance relative of Smith, and Smith would cease to exist.

Of course maybe Hornwager hadn't wanted Smith to have never existed because Smith himself was necessary for Hornwager's success with time travel. If Smith hadn't lived, Hornwager wouldn't have the ability to have gone back in time to kill him.

It was while dwelling on the intricacies inherent in time travel that I started forming the plan of which this affidavit is part.

First, I talked to Fred, the department psychologist. Fred was less than enthusiastic, but I finally got him to agree to participate after I promised to meet with him and talk about my feelings regarding the Callahan crippling. (I crippled an innocent kid during a shootout with a hopped-up Jesse James. How did Fred think I felt?)

Then, I brought Hornwager in for questioning.

While Fred acted the good cop to my bad, he somehow managed to hypnotise Hornwager. If I hadn't been there, I don't know if I would have believed that it could be done. Being there, I still wasn't quite sure how Fred managed to pull it off.

Anyway, Fred then followed my script and told Hornwager that he had gone into the future and discovered that I would find a way to nail him for Smith's murder. Fred then planted a dream that Hornwager would have the next time he slept.

In the dream, Hornwager goes back in time to kill my grandfather and this murder in the past solves his problem in the future without threatening him in the present.

It was a bold plan. If it worked and Hornwager fell for the bait, I'd have him dead to rights for premeditated murder.

While Fred trusted his mumbo-jumbo, he didn't believe that my plan would work. Furthermore, if a miracle occurred and the plan somehow did catch a killer, Fred thought that the price was much too high.

However, my grandfather spent most of his life in horrible, twisted pain. His only child—my father—was the type of person who made you want to become a police officer in order to arrest similar SOBs. The last link in the chain—yours truly—crippled a six-year-old kid.

I'm not thrilled with the idea of dying, but Hornwager has to be stopped or he will continue using time travel to commit any number of crimes. Furthermore, if Hornwager isn't held accountable for what he has done, the criminal element will be all over time travel technology and then no one will be safe.

(Why couldn't Hornwager have used the technology to move Callahan only two feet to the left?)

If I suddenly cease to exist, that along with this affidavit is proof that Hornwager went back and killed my grandfather.

There's no statue of limitations on murder. If I can't pin Smith on Hornwager, my fellow officers can at least pin my grandfather on him, and perhaps dear old Dad and myself.

While I admit that I'm scared and not without second thoughts, I feel like I have to go through with this. If the plan works, in some ways it will be a relief.

My only real question—and I know that it's a little late to think about it now—is what will happen to this statement when I blink out of existence.

What happens to anyone who has read it?

What happens

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## The Knight of Olmedo

David Randall

Don Alonso de Olmedo hastened out of his village church before the priest would hear his confession. “Old slug!” he spat out so the words clapped loud as cannonades from the one side of the main square to the other and back again before they dwindled to feeble echoes along the peeling white walls of houses sprawling down to the baking, empty fields that kept the mountains at bay. “Am I a peasant to be kept waiting? Up, Rafael,” he called to the man who sat in the horses’ shadows patching a worn-out saddle. “Up and ride. They dance in Segovia when the sun sets tonight, and I shall be there before the stars are out. Hurry, man!” he cried impatiently. “Look how the sun falls!” He leapt astride his stallion, so suddenly squeezing its flanks with his knees that it neighed for shock, and paced it round the square while Rafael made more careful ascent onto his calmer palfrey.

“Bad for the digestion to ride after eating,” said Rafael as they cantered out of Olmedo, that small plant of somnolent humanity that sprouted among the wheat fields and waited for the inevitable weeding by famine or by drought. “Bad for the soul to leave home unshriven.” He took a wineskin from his side and pressed it to his lips. “Dry day.” He offered the skin to Don Alonso. The Knight of Olmedo shook his head. “All the more for me,” Rafael said to himself. He brought his arm to his face and wiped purple droplets from the grizzle of his beard. “Go back to the priest,” he said more loudly to Don Alonso. “Sometimes the stars rise late.”

“I follow an early star,” said Don Alonso, and spurred his stallion to a bloody, gasping gallop. Rafael sighed, urged his palfrey to greater speed, and tried to keep his master in sight. Far behind them, in Olmedo, the priest signed a wavering cross over his chest to bless the disappearing specks he

thought were young Don Alonso and his groom. Then he waddled to the bell-rope and swung it with all the strength his old muscles could achieve till the bells slowly tolled their afternoon call. Old women in black tottered from their houses to the church to pray for their husbands long-dead in battles against the French in Cataluña and the Netherlands. “Amen,” said Rafael to the faint clang behind them. Don Alonso heard nothing and rode faster still.

*He halted the horses when the high arches of the Aqueduct of Segovia came into view against the twilight. “Do you hear anything?” Don Alonso asked. He patted his stallion gently and slipped it a rough-chopped handful of sugarcane.*

“A stork,” said Rafael. Don Alonso heard it too, croaking from a nest up in the channel the Romans had laid stone by laborious stone. Water slapped against the granite above. “A stork wading. Only drink wine, Don Alonso.” Rafael shook his half-empty wineskin. “Or buy us some rum.”

“No viols,” said Don Alonso. “No guitars. We’ve arrived early.” He smiled in the darkness and slid to the ground. “We can walk in from here, Rafael. No, you walk the horses in, let them rest. I’ll go in on my own.” He listened to the silent shadows a moment longer, then strode off towards the far lights of Segovia. “Wait!” said Rafael a second too late for his soft voice to carry to Don Alonso’s ear. “There might be thieves.” There was no reply but the fading tones of a ballad whose sad words Don Alonso gave a cheerful lilt. “Then again, there might not be.” He bunched the reins of stallion and mare in a leather posy. “Let’s get you something to drink,” he said to the horses, who whinnied assent. “And grass. Time enough to get to town. He’ll dance all night, if I know him.” He whistled a dance tune, hopped into the air and kicked his legs, chuckled, and made at a steady pace for a nearby brook.

Don Alonso found a loose wall of people ringing the main square of Segovia. They were masked—he found a Mercury

*upright only from the press of people around him, took wings and laurels from off Mercury's wine-red face, and went on in classical guise. Other would-be gods surrounded him. Two Dianas compared the goldwork on their bows and cast fluttering glances at a tall Mars in red silks who preening stroked his mustache and paid little attention to the praise elderly Pluto and squat Jupiter gave the sweet Galician wine. Twin Titans, a brace of students from Salamanca by their ostentatious Latin, sneered at their neighbors and sniggered at a blond Hera whose brazenly uncovered hair fell down in ringlets to her waist. Other revelers lacked the taste for divinity. Princes and Moors, roses and magpies, lions and falcons—all waited for the music to start.*

*Don Alonso, new Mercury fell in with a man who wore wooden armor and held a trident. "Neptune?" asked Mercury, and boiled behind his own mask as perhaps-Neptune at length considered the proper response.*

*"A gladiator," the Gladiator said. "Dancing to the tune Caesar pipes." His trident impaled a leaf of Mercury's laurels. "I thought you were someone else."*

*"I was," replied Mercury, and laughed. "So, dancer, when does the dancing start? And whom shall I dance with?" he continued, before the Gladiator could answer his first question. "Diana in silver has a wart on her nose the size of my thumb. Diana in blue is a crone. Hera is a clubfoot. The flower is a tailor's daughter and the bird is a whore. Where is Venus?" Mercury turned his head from side to side, vainly scanning the crowd.*

*"Safely hid in her clamshell," the Gladiator said, a touch sharply, inaudible beneath the loud start of a pavana and the rumble of feet into the square. The Gladiator's eyes strayed to a balcony that had been occupied a second before—he started, and clenched his trident. "I think. Pardon me, Don Mercury," he said to the inattentive god, bowed slightly, and stalked away. Mercury tossed a coin to a young boy carrying hot spiced wine, old heavy silver stamped with the face of a grave king who frowned at the future and the frivolous world beyond his metal remembrance. The boy weighed it appreciatively and*

*gave Mercury a skin of unwatered wine. Mercury drank down to the dregs in one long swallow, yelled for pleasure, and plunged into the swirl of the square.*

*Mercury left a string of exhausted partners behind him as dance followed upon dance; as the zarabanda succeeded the pavana, as zarabandas and pavanas both died away and left chaconas and alemanas to dance on their graves. Some of his partners were old, and wished Mercury had come to earth when they were lighter on their feet. Others were lame, and wished childbirth and smallpox had not hobbled them. Still others gasped with the fashionable exhaustion pretended to by the youth of the court, and wished that Mercury would dance more slowly. These last Mercury would spin round ferociously, spin till they fell to the ground in a heap. Then Mercury would bow before the applause of women whose daughters disdained the youth their mothers could no longer enjoy, and pluck a new partner from the crowd.*

*Venus, touched with pearls at her ears and neck and draped in white cotton against the night, stepped lightly under torches whose light limned but did not brighten her black tresses. She danced demurely—but her eyes shone through her mask, her head shook to the music, and her raven locks were heedless wantons as they curled around her frame. She smiled a little when Mercury rescued her from a bald, toothless Apollo, smiled more at the speed with which he sprang and pirouetted, and matched his speed with lightning grace that did not know how fast it sped. Mercury laughed aloud and danced faster still. Venus paced him effortlessly, measure for measure and dance for dance, and when they came to themselves the stars were brighter than the torches and the masquers beginning to drift yawning to their expectant beds and homes.*

*“Doña Venus,” said Mercury reverentially, took her hand in his and kissed it. He brushed her attared wrist, then firmly pressed his lips upon her fingers, lingered with his fingers on her palm.*

*“Doña Ines,” Venus replied. “Dance slowly, once, before the night is over.” Mercury nodded yes, put one hand upon her*

*waist and the other palm to palm, and fixed his eyes upon her ink-dot pupils opposite till the stately strumming of the guitar wound down to silence.*

“Where shall I find you?” Mercury asked.

“Who shall look for me?” Doña Ines let her mask fall. Her face was weathered porcelain, beautiful with the recent memory of beauty greater still. The strands of hair upon her forehead were cobweb grey. Her eyes were hard with revelatory fear.

“Don Alonso de Olmedo,” said Don Alonso, his own mask falling on the wine-stained pebbles. “Don Alonso who fears nothing”—he took her in his arms—“not death,”—he kissed her hesitant lips once—“not age,”—he looked at her face, shuddered, drew back a little from its hollows kissed by time, then continued heedless—“not God himself.” He felt Doña Ines’ spine stiffen, melted it with another kiss. She was old, he had mistaken her, and he kissed her with a desperate, resentful passion. “Where shall I find you, Doña Ines, Doña Venus?”

“Who would you find there—Ines or Venus?” She stayed in his arms a second, laughed unsteadily, broke away. “I’ll light a candle at the balcony by the apricot tree. The house of the Conde de Medina,” she rushed to whisper, and blushed. “To light your way.” Doña Ines raised her mask again, and Venus sought an alley that curved Venus out of sight.

Below a trellis of grape vines the Gladiator sat gnawing his lip. Mercury tripped over him—“Your pardon,” Mercury said—“Oh, it’s you, the dancer. Tell me, dancer, where is the house of the Conde de Medina?” He looked anxiously for apricots.

“By the city walls, five houses north of the Aqueduct,” the Gladiator replied, not thinking of his words till they had left his mouth. Then he gave Mercury an appraising, thoughtful glance, stroked the scabbard left empty for the dance. “Did you by any chance meet Venus, country God?”

“I did!” Mercury sniffed his hand for the faint attar scent that remained from her impress. “She’s a blushing maiden, but she moves!” He winked at the Gladiator, screamed inside.

*“Just her feet so far, dancer, but the rest of her soon. Up the apricot tree says she, but I’m up for riper fruit. So long, dancer—finish the night with a Venus of your own.”*

*The Gladiator put a restraining hand on Mercury’s shoulder. “I have one already.” Mercury shrugged to escape, but could not lose the tight grip. “And I think I know where she’s been. Venus lies under Neptune’s protection,” the Gladiator said, “and there’ll be no apricots for you,”—Don Alonso lashed out. The Gladiator measured a man’s distance through the air. His head cracked against a table. He jerked convulsively, lay slumped and still but for a trickle of blood from his head.*

*“You’re not Neptune. You’re just a dancer.” Mercury massaged his hand. “Dancer, you have a hard chin. I think I broke my finger on it.” He tried to straighten his joints, winced at the attempt. “I did.” He stopped by the Gladiator long enough to hear his ragged breathing. “And don’t put your hand on me again, whoever you are.” He sighted the Aqueduct over the low roof by him and began to trot towards where it met the city walls.*

*The apricot tree was thick and old, a knotted staircase from the loam below to the flowered balcony above and up higher still. Mercury scrambled up it one-handed, whistling birdsong to hide his ascent. In the branches he plucked fruit and dropped them to Doña Ines below, gently tossing them to her left and right, before her and behind her.*

*She lifted her candle above her, a light shield against the soft barrage. “Don Alonso?” she whispered—“Oh, you must be Don Alonso.” She laughed happily, uncertainly. “Come with gifts.” She picked up an apricot, hesitantly burst its skin, tried to find Don Alonso’s eyes in the dark. She had changed, shucked her pearls for a naked neck and the ruffles of a Paris nightgown never meant for sleep. The ruffles were uncreased, never worn before. “I thought I would drop roses for you, roses bound in my hair. You would tie my hair to yours, and then you would sing songs to me. But it’s you dropping gifts for me. Should I sing?” Doña Ines trilled a wooing rhyme, Come down, lady with the orange petal hands.*

*Mercury left his mask hanging from a branch and Don Alonso came down, legs bending and hale hand out to steady his fall. “Sing some more,” Don Alonso said, for Doña Ines had faltered at his appearance by her side. “I’ll finish your apricot for you.” He took the fruit from her unresisting fingers, looked at the broken hollow her teeth had made in its skin, nibbled delicately round the edge where skin cut down to flesh.*

*Doña Ines sang Boabdil looked back at fallen Granada, saw Don Alonso smile, bit her lip in a manner Don Alonso thought he recognized. She flushed, asked with embarrassed annoyance, “Don’t you have a message, Mercury, Don Alonso? You’re the one who should speak and sing. I thought you would be down in the garden.”*

*“I entered one garden, saw another, thought to enter it too.” Don Alonso stroked the grey strands in her raven hair and told himself they were silver wire pliable as their mistress. He thought to hesitate, to stop. “And now I sit in the second garden with you. Mercury brings a message of love, Doña Ines, and could not trust the air to convey his words for him. You danced as if nothing could stop you, Doña Ines, and nothing did, for you danced your way into my heart.” No. He had begun; he would go on. He bent over her and kissed her tentatively, polite question that brought—after long pause when his spirit fell—firm answer. Her lips were warm and smooth. “I saw you,” he said after a while, “the only young woman at the dance. The only young woman in all Spain,” he added bitterly, looking away from her face to the gaunt space where no moon shone that night, “willing to live. Have you felt it? The way they all wait to die, eagerly wait. Men like women, women like death itself, all swaddled by their priests, waiting for a gift of life from God. No one knows how to take in this country.” Don Alonso gripped Doña Ines tight with his hand, to take the nearest thing to youth, to feel if she would be taken.*

*Doña Ines gripped him tightly back, interlaced her fingers with his though they shrank and shivered and jerked to be free. “I was younger once. So young, so fast you would have fallen gasping to the ground and I would have danced on till the sun rose, and till it set again.” She sighed. “They engaged me to a*

*rich man. He had been a soldier, before I was born. He saw his sword and could not recognize it. But he knew me when he saw me, knew what I was for,”—Doña Ines shuddered, curled into Don Alonso’s arm for the warmth it gave. “I refused him. At the altar. Then they—they would not even give me the relief of the convent. They said I would have no bridegroom but Time himself. That they would keep me in our house forever, till he came for me.” Doña Ines—she did not sob, but she might have, had she not done with sobs years before. She laid his hand higher on her arm, near her elbow.*

*“Ah!” Don Alonso jerked the hand away from her. “Softly, I’m injured.” He smiled at Doña Ines ruefully, wickedly. “But I’ll risk my finger for you tonight, any night.” Four-fingered he raised the hairs on her arm, stroking gently. “They say Mercury is a thief, Doña Ines, that he steals maidens’ hearts and heads away.” He stroked higher.*

*Doña Ines stopped him with fingers of her own. “Mercury should wait till he’s stolen away the maiden herself.” She gulped for air, drank in bravado from the night. “Who will come with him happily, swiftly find a priest with him.” She looked back at the house she had lived in for so long. “Swiftly leave her home, forever.”*

*“Wait? Priest?” Don Alonso snarled, a cloud suddenly come over his face. “Death hurries. Live now. Hurry with our—little death.” He gestured crudely, stripped his words of all euphemism. He looked contemptuously at her fright, her timid age. “You have my word, Doña Ines. I love you,”—he almost stopped to feel that love, to make the words true—“I will marry you.” He would not repent his words, would not repent his mistake of her. He stood up, suddenly, brutally. “I will not wait.” He would not repent her.*

*He stayed apart, did wait a very few seconds, and it was Doña Ines who came to him across the balcony. Her feet stumbled as she walked. She looked at her room—her small room. She looked, her feet walked, Don Alonso smiled for the both of them, there was no need to think during what followed. There was even some pleasure, though, all in all, she was more*

*unhappy than not. The memory of dancing earlier distracted her.*

*The Gladiator's trident nudged them awake with the dawn. "Mercury has a face," he said contemplatively. "Ines, do you know if the face has a name?" She made no answer, only huddled smaller in her nightgown. "Venus indeed," the Gladiator sighed. "Old Mars should have satisfied your lusts." He slapped her cheek, hard. It turned red in silence.*

*"I am Don Alonso de Olmedo," said Don Alonso, clothes collected and knife out. "You are mistreating my betrothed. You are? —"*

*"My brother." Doña Ines spoke out of one side of her mouth. "My jailer."*

*"Don Rodrigo de Medina." Don Rodrigo bowed, waved his trident hospitably, mockingly—winced, rubbed a lump on the back of his head. "You cut our introductions short when last we met. Welcome to my father the Count's house, Don Alonso. You should not have entered it. My sister,"—he nodded to her—"should never have left it. But make yourself free of all it contains." The trident waved again, spun and lunged, Don Alonso's knife lay glittering on the floor. The trident pressed against Don Alonso's throat. "I have not consented to any marriage. Nor has my father."*

*"I am of noble family and pure blood," said Don Alonso, and he shoved the trident aside. Don Rodrigo let him shove. "I shall ask no dowry." Doña Ines began to cry, slow tears that coursed the lines on her cheeks. "I will kill you for the insult you have given Doña Ines." He turned his back on Don Rodrigo's trident, took up his knife and slid it back into his scabbard.*

*"My sister,"—red spots glowed in Don Rodrigo's pale cheeks—"has lived these ten years because she is of our family. If any one else had offered such an insult to the honor of our family,"—Don Rodrigo's leather glove split, then the trident, broken in two. Don Rodrigo blinked at his fist's fury, shrugged apologetically at Don Alonso, picked the splinters from his palm, attempted a smile that died. "A slap is little*

*enough.” Don Rodrigo examined his fingernails, composure regained. “Your offer is pathetic. She could have had a duke. A knight from Olmedo is no one.”*

*“Doña Ines,” said Don Alonso, “if you will come with me?” He turned from Don Rodrigo to her, held out his hand. “He can do no worse than kill us. You will be wife or dead. Take my hand.”*

*“I would not,” said Don Rodrigo—his knife pinked Doña Ines’ temple. She was still, absolutely still. “I would not do it, sister. I will blind you, sister. I will blind you and bind you in a room whose door will never be opened again by any man but me. You will sit there year after year, eating and sleeping and never moving, and once a year I will dance with you, sister. While we dance I will tell you what Don Alonso has done this year to try to free you—you shall go free, Don Alonso. I have no wish to kill you, and you shall not make me kill you against my will. We will dance, sister, and one year I shall tell you that Don Alonso has grown tired of the wasted years, that he has married some girl with bright eyes and a dancer’s body. Then we shall dance no more.” Don Rodrigo nodded to Don Alonso. “I am a man of honor, Don Alonso—trust me, I shall do it. If you truly love my sister, leave her now.”*

*Don Alonso dropped his hand. “Doña Ines, I will,”—he did not know what he would do. “Doña Ines,” he said again to her despairing, stone face, her face mute and helpless, saw another face and knew his only hope. “I will go to the King. I shall tell him what your brother has done—what your family has done. Then he will make you mine.” His voice promised her his sure victory. “I’ll come for you before the sun rises again.”*

*“The King,” Doña Ines whispered. She laughed brittlely, slumped into silence. “Goodbye, Don Alonso.” She offered her arm to Don Rodrigo. “Thank you for the dance, Mercury.”*

*“The King,” Don Rodrigo chuckled, took Doña Ines’ arm gently captive. “But then,” he said with a sliver of doubt, enough to put the light back in his sister’s eyes. “Better to be sure. Don Alonso,” he called out. “I am hungry and I need a bandage for my head. I will leave for Madrid after breakfast.*

*Leave now, and you will have three hours to tell the King your story. Three whole hours,” he said, and turned his back, and laughed to drown the birdsong from the dawn. He laughed till Don Alonso’s blood boiled, till Don Alonso drew his knife on Don Rodrigo’s blind nape and his knife sliced through the air and slowed because Rafael had seized his hand, slowed, stopped, went backwards in Rafael’s irresistible pull.*

“Quietly, Don Alonso,” said Rafael, “and he’ll never know what you tried to do.” He held Don Alonso tightly, till his master went limp in his arms. “Find an angry young man, I said to myself,” Rafael conversationally continued, “find an angry young man, maybe a man with a lump on his head, and follow him. You’ll find Don Alonso if you follow him, I said, and I was right, wasn’t I? A long night I spent looking for you, Don Alonso, and I find you about to backstab a man.” He shook his head sadly, let the young man go.

“Damn you,” said Don Alonso quietly. “Damn you to hell, and damn me to hell too, for all I care.” He slammed his knife into his scabbard. “Damn you for stopping me.” He saw Rafael ward himself with the sign of the cross, would not join him. He caught a last, backward glimpse from Doña Ines before she disappeared behind a shut door. “Where are the horses?”

“In the garden,” said Rafael, pointing out their shapes in the foliage below. “Where are we going?”

“Madrid,” Don Alonso brusquely replied. “We’ll be there and back again by sunrise, on my word.” He ran to the apricot tree, began to shinny down it as quickly as he could.

Rafael followed. “Go gentle on the horses till we’re past the Guadarramas,” he called out. “I know those mountains. They’re high and steep.”

They left their horses half-dead in a tiring station in Aravaca, came to Madrid on hobbling, hired nags. The sun cast long shadows from the west as the dusty palaces came

into view, lit the trickle of Manzanares River to oily, scarlet reflection. A basin, once filled with water at a king's command to float a spectacle of sea-fights, throbbed to the moans of wild dogs prowling on the dry stones. Ragged soldiers herded a chain of convicts bound for the Valencia galleys, ragged soldiers who said nothing and did nothing as the convicts swore vile oaths at the black-clad nuns who silently observed the road from the roof of the brick building that was their world. A nun—wrinkled as the cliffs above the Manzanares—waved slowly to Don Alonso as he passed. He shivered, and ineffectually spurred his nag.

The gates to the city were still open. "The royal palace?" asked Don Alonso of the one-armed watchman drooping in his box. The watchman's nose slid further towards his chest. "The royal palace!" Don Alonso said again, loudly.

The watchman's eyes jerked up, tried to make out Don Alonso in the sun's last glare. "No one there," he mumbled. "Not for years." His armless shoulder tossed its empty sleeve upwards. The watchman shook his head, made an inaudible apology, scratched his red nose with his other hand. "Not since the old king died." His eyelids ratcheted downwards.

"The king then!" cried Don Alonso. "Where is the king?" He rattled the watchman's box with his reins, whipped the air with the horsesweat-stained leather.

"In the duke's palace. At the top of the hill." The watchman searched for, found, pointed at the porphyry palace whose columns Spanish soldiers had ripped out of the heart of Rome itself. "There." His fingers fell and cupped themselves into a fleshy begging bowl. Don Alonso cursed the watchman, kicked at the outstretched hand as he spurred forward. Rafael fell behind, dropped the watchman a small copper that bounced off horny fingernails and landed face down by the watchman's shoes.

The road up to the duke's palace was crowded with jostling coaches. Don Alonso forced his horse into the narrow spaces between their wide rumbling wheels, felt splinters tear at his calves and felt the impress of patches of gold leaf that peeled off of carriage doors to cling heavily to his boots before

they blew away in the hot wind. Prideful coachmen yelled angrily at him as he passed them by. Noblemen and their ladies, amused at his presumptuous rush, tittered and called out breathless encouragements to him from behind the lace curtains and iron lattices of their jouncing windows. Gayer blades idly predicted that the furiously scowling horseman would or would not make it to the duke's door before the sunset, then wagered their mortgaged and twice-mortgaged estates upon the surety of their beliefs.

Don Alonso stopped by the stable boy nearest to the door, brought the horse to a scuffling stop that sprayed dust on his reluctant attendant. He swung his leg over and down—the stirrups, rotten, broke before his whirling motion. He fell the last small distance to the ground, took the pain in his shins with a grunt. He thrust the reins at the nervously giggling boy. “Stable him. Replace the stirrups—you’ll be paid.” He rubbed his legs, hissed at the pressure of his hands, and jerked himself upright. Don Alonso walked to the door stiff-legged and stumbling.

“You are here for the banquet?” the footman asked him as he stepped through the duke’s door a bare instant before the sun winked out of sight behind the western mountains. The servant eyed Don Alonso’s unshaven face and dusty clothes, gazed cool disbelief that his question could receive a positive answer.

“I am here to see the King,” said Don Alonso. “He must help me.” Don Alonso peered past the footman’s shoulder, looked for an exit from the anteroom.

The footman bowed humbly to a passing grandee, returned his attention to Don Alonso. “The King dines with the duke tonight. Have you been invited here, sir? No one may speak to the King who is not the duke’s guest.” The grandee turned left down a passage suddenly redolent with the smells of roast meat and spices. “If you leave your name, the duke may be so gracious as to admit you to the King’s presence.” The footman bobbed his head reverentially at the prospect of a such a kindness from the duke. His smile gainsaid that kindness’ likelihood.

“I am Don Alonso de Olmedo,” said Don Alonso. He began to stump after the grandee, ignoring the footman’s hurriedly interposed flurry of hands and objections. “The King is my master, not your duke. Your duke has no right to keep me away from the King.” The footman babbled words of horrified decorum, turned white, and ran to the white plaster doors where the scent of food and the sound of voices was strongest. There he interposed his body in front of the door handles and frantically beckoned the nearby waiters to join him. They turned from surreptitious forays upon the jellies and desserts in their charge—Don Alonso’s hand was on his knife, its steel bare a clear three inches. The waiters stared at him astonished, porcine faces only slowly registering awareness of his existence. Then they fled as fast as their stout legs would carry them, dropping porcelain and glassware behind them to crack on rugs or smash on the stone floor. Don Alonso turned to the lone footman. “Get out of my way now,” said Don Alonso, growling and drawing his knife further free, “or I’ll cut your heart out.” The footman gurgled, turned green, and fell out of Don Alonso’s way. Don Alonso stalked forward and flung wide the doors.

The air of the banqueting hall was warm and moist. Around Don Alonso chatter and the sounds of chewing and belching floated in a mist of sound that thinned and dispersed entirely as he made his way to the far front table. A deaf Portuguese butchered Castillian as he gabbled loudly of his goiter in the still hall, till a neighboring hand muffled his lips and pointed out Don Alonso’s slow advance. A harpist played a sprightly Neapolitan tune. His fingers ran lightly from string to string. His eyes sharply followed the face and hands of a large man draped in a Muscovy sable, a jowly, red-faced man who greased his mustachioes and inked his grey hairs black except for the silver patches that spread from his temples back over his ears. Beefy fingers waved for silence—the harpist’s fingers flew from the strings as from molten metal—and came to rest on the back of the high gold chair that headed the table, that headed the room. The thick arc of sable and flesh, casually possessive, held within it a small, scrawny figure. He—the figure’s cheeks betrayed its sex by the sprout of a few stray hairs—was dressed all in cloth-of-gold brighter than the lank

yellow locks that dripped onto his forehead and curled into his ears. His face was long and narrow, the forehead squeezed tighter than a thought's breadth. The jaw jutted beyond all reasonable measure and hung open. Every now and then the figure remembered to chew; otherwise he drooled. A valet stood behind him with a handkerchief at the ready, a handkerchief constantly employed. The figure looked at Don Alonso with an incurious, uncomprehending stare imprinted on his chimera face, his mute and helpless face that partook of man, child and dumb beast. The figure looked at Don Alonso, and let fall a gob of saliva down his cheek to his lap. The valet imperturbably wiped the figure dry.

“Your Majesty,” Don Alonso roughly whispered, and knelt and bowed before the figure, knelt so for one second he saw the floor only, and not his drooling King. He looked up again, straight at that vacant face. “Your Majesty,” he repeated loudly, “I am Don Alonso de Olmedo, a knight of pure and noble blood. Your Majesty, I am your knight.” *Knight*, the word echoed round the room. “My father fought for your father in Portugal and Cataluña. My grandfather died for your grandfather in Germany. I will gladly die for you when we go to war again. If we go to war again.” Don Alonso swallowed, his throat dry and lumpy. “We have been yours and your family’s, Your Majesty, like dogs. Faithful. And we have never asked for anything, nothing but to serve you like honorable men. Now I ask you for a bone, Your Majesty.” Don Alonso’s voice cracked to a halt. He thought of Doña Ines’ weathered face. His throat loosened slightly. He thought of Don Rodrigo’s mocking laugh. He spoke. “My betrothed, Doña Ines de Medina”—a hawk-nosed, greying man at the end of the table sprang to his feet with a cry, to be silenced by a motion from beefy, sabled fingers—“is held in dishonorable captivity by her cruel family. Your Majesty, I beg you to order her family to set her free. She is my intended, my wife in all but the sacraments.” A buzz rose from the tables. The hawk-nosed man paled. “Order her freedom, Your Majesty, so we may marry and raise more sons for your service. Your Majesty—Sire. Lord.” Don Alonso stopped, got to his feet. He drew his knife from his scabbard. A louder gasp filled the room.

“Treason!” The sabled man stood now, a vast bear shaking with purple-wattled rage. “Insolence! The King hears no requests from traitors who draw a blade in the royal presence. The King orders your arrest—”

“I heard nothing from the King.” Don Alonso gave the sabled man the briefest of contemptuous looks. The sabled man turned purpler yet, swallowed at the air in silent shock. The King—twisted his lips, a shadowy rictus of a smile. Which faded. To incomprehension only barely lesser than before. “Your Majesty,” said Don Alonso to the glassy eyes, “I bear this knife as a free man.” Don Alonso reversed his hold on the knife, slid his hand down so he held the blade in his hand, put the knife on the table in front of the King with the hilt nearest the King’s pale, stubby hands. “Take it, Your Majesty. Take it and take me. Take me for everything. Only save her.” He sank to his knees. “Save her, Lord.” He waited, agonized waiting, for a sign that he had been heard.

“Guards, come here.” The sabled man bellowed hoarse with rage. Quick martial footsteps pattered up behind Don Alonso. “Take him away. This madman has interrupted the King’s dinner for too long already. The King orders—”

“Stay.” A slurred, feathery command. The footsteps stilled. “Stay.” The King—he looked at Don Alonso, he saw him. His jaw wobbled: tremulous, pendulous, striving to pronounce. “Duke,”—he turned to the man in sables—“he stay.” A cringing supplication, a command. The footsteps went away. Brittle fingers took Don Alonso’s knife, lifted it to the painted angels on the ceiling. “Mine.” The knife wavered, slipped to the table edge to hang suspended over the air. “Take again.” The King drooled, spat feebly into the valet’s quick cloth. “From me.” A spasm came over the thin face. The King cried, a strange bird over a far sea.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Don Alonso took back his knife and sheathed it. He stood, cried softly himself at the pain in his shins.

“Your Majesty,” said the duke to the quivering King. He spoke with rough authority, a condescending nurse constrained to patience by a willful charge. “You act against your own

interests. You act too quickly. You do not understand the significance of his actions. This man threatened you when he drew his knife on you—that is what a naked blade means in the presence of the King.” Honey summoned by necessity sweetened his speech. “He insulted me, your friend, your protector. He said,”—the duke hesitated—“injurious things of the Conde de Medina. The Conde,”—he pointed at the hawk-nosed man, who bowed, and came forward at the beckons of that finger heavy of gold rings and old feasts.

“I am your friend too, Your Majesty,” said the Conde, an unblinking snake who grinned at the King but never smiled. “I have been your friend since you were a boy, Your Majesty.” He held the King’s limp gaze in his bulbous eyes. “I am a man of honor, Your Majesty. He has said things of me, of my daughter—you would not let him say such things of me, Your Majesty.” The Conde touched his tongue to his few, sharp teeth. “Your Majesty, you would not let him say such things of a friend.”

“Friend?” The King looked restlessly away from the Conde, to Don Alonso, to the Duke. “He friend?” He shook his head uncertainly, hunched shoulders swaying with the motion of his head.

“No!” Don Alonso shook his head violently, lurched forward to the table—swept away a silver soup tureen in his frenzy. Flying drops made the Duke dance, twisting in defense of his fine sable. The King smiled again, almost gurgled a chuckle before Don Alonso’s blazing countenance entranced him, fascinated him with its uncontrolled contortions. “He is not your friend, Your Majesty. He is no man of honor—not he, nor any of his brood who keep Doña Ines prisoner. He is her,”—her word came to him—“her jailer. He speaks of his honor and he will not let her stir. He is an ogre. He is not fit to wear a sword at his side. He should wear locks and manacles.”

“I will remember that,” said the Conde. Familiar red spots glowed in his cheeks. “On my honor.”

“Dungeon honor, Your Majesty,” said Don Alonso, intent upon his sovereign. “Their arms hold you. Their tongues smother you. Your Majesty, stand up and walk. Walk freely.”

The King's eyes rolled from side to side, lolling on the Duke's surrounding bulk, the Conde's close approach. His teeth clattered, unstoppable. He rose—tried to rise. The Duke's heavy hand lay on his shoulder. The Conde tugged gently on his cloth-of-gold sleeve, tugged downward.

“You should not exert yourself, Your Majesty.” The Conde patted the King's wrist, patted him into his throne. “You will tire yourself. A walk would be unwise, Your Majesty, not wise at all.”

“Not wise,” said the King, “not wise.” He looked pleadingly at Don Alonso, gurgled, and stuck a finger in his ear. He looked at nothing now.

“Your friends,” said Don Alonso. He laughed bitterly, suppressed a wild urge to rave and scream. “Free whom you can, Your Majesty. Free Doña Ines. She shall dance, Your Majesty, dance like the free wind, and never stop till she is dead. We will fly where your friends will never catch us. Free her, Your Majesty. She shall dance for you.” He pictured her old and hobbling, quickly brushed the picture from his mind. He thumped the table with his fist. “On my honor, Your Majesty, she shall.” There was no response.

The Duke passed his hands over the King's still face, smiled broadly. “Sound asleep.” He removed his arms from around the King. The Conde lifted his own hands, reached out over the table and slapped Don Alonso backhand in one flowing motion. He wore a diamond ring. His gloves came back bloody from their sally. The Conde frowned at them, dipped them in a carafe of cold water. The Duke laughed. “A strong, young fellow, Conde. Look at him! Didn't budge. They must breed them strong in—where did you say you were from, you? Out with it!” The duke was jovial. He cracked his knuckles, sneaked a look at the King. “Asleep for sure. Music!” The harpist nodded, brought his fingers to the harp once more, and the notes joyfully poured forth.

“He said he was from Olmedo,” said the Conde, fastidiously licking the last drops of blood from his glove. “I know the place. Some of my estates lie near it.” He smiled sourly at Don Alonso. “I shall have it burned to the ground. He

shall watch, before he is hanged. Your lordship does not object if I claim him for my own?" The Conde laughed a self-deprecating laugh that mocked the acquiring urge; the Conde laughed the laugh of a ferret and a torturer.

The duke joined him in laughter, booming gusts that cracked the silence in the banqueting hall. Voices welled up from nowhere, servants began to move again. "Better, better," roared the duke. "My guests should enjoy themselves. And the people who aren't my guests,"—he bowed hugely to Don Alonso—"why, my friend the Conde here will teach them manners." He laughed again—the laughter was taken up by the nearer guests, then the farther, a wave of deferential hilarity that filled the room and wrenched mouths, but touched no hearts. The duke cast a brooding eye on the sleeping King. "Conde, keep our Olmedo here till I get back. I think my guests should see me away from His Majesty for a while." He heaved himself up from his chair, winked at Don Alonso. "*My King.*" He sauntered away to the nearest table for a glad word and a hail-fellow handshake with the waiting, ingratiating lords.

"Tell me," said the Conde in Don Alonso's ear, "did you say the truth about my daughter?" He pushed Don Alonso roughly round the table and into the duke's seat by the sleeping King. The Conde sat on his captive's unflanked side, sharp fingernails tapping Don Alonso's arm. "Tell me the truth and I'll let the villagers leave before I burn your Olmedo."

"Before God, she is my wife," said Don Alonso, bitterly. He did not smile. He did not frown. He was very tired. He kicked himself under the table, kicked his shins. His eyes flicked open. "Your son can tell you when he comes."

"Ah." The Conde detached a bowl of strawberries from a passing waiter, popped one whole into his mouth to be spitted between two lonely incisors. "A despoiler, not a liar. Interesting. Was she worth the while?" The Conde bit elegantly at the tip of a second strawberry. His bulging eyes stared interestedly at Don Alonso.

"She is your daughter," said Don Alonso, disgusted turned away from the Conde's avid face. The King's eyes were open.

He shook his head minutely at Don Alonso's quickly parting lips, nodded regal satisfaction at Don Alonso's silent obedience.

“An informative despoiler. How kind.” The Conde let all five fingernails rest on Don Alonso's arm, abruptly withdrew them into the hovering air. “I thought Ines too old to attract such passionate attentions as yours. Tell me, despoiler, what are my daughter's charms? How long till they fade? I am not,” said the Conde dry as olive trees in drought, “a cruel man—you were unkind to say so. Tell me when and how I may safely keep Ines in loose captivity. I am not just a man of honor, Knight of Olmedo. I am a loving father.” A strawberry pulped between his teeth.

“How?” Don Alonso spoke to the King; spoke as if they sat alone and the King were a man. “Chop off her feet, perhaps. I saw her dancing and I fell in love. Crop short her hair. She was all modesty when she danced, but her hair beckoned me on. Pull out her tongue; she sang love-songs. Gouge out her eyes—your son threatened to do that to her, but it would be a kindness more than a threat. Her eyes have life, and life will come to rescue life as long as eyes may see.” The King most deliberately raised and lowered his eyelids, now kept them open, unblinking. Don Alonso dared to hope. “But none of this will be necessary, Conde. Coop her for a few more years and her life will die within her. Then you may parade her naked in the streets. Safely.”

The King looked elsewhere. Don Alonso followed his gaze. At a lower table daughters freed of fathers and wives freed of husbands ate together, bosom friendships and solemn hates gleefully revived while the banquet's boon of social intercourse endured. Some were flirtatiously daring, wore their scarves low—a poor, pinched Asturian self-consciously stroked her Visigoth blond hair and exuded proud comparisons with her languid Murcian neighbor's *converso* curls. Wigged matrons preened to the passing duke's effusive compliments, then relapsed to silent condemnation of their forward companions. The highest ladies, emerald brooches and adorning parrot-feathers resplendent upon them, paid court to a moon-faced young woman whose pleased arrogance

reflected upon the diamonds carefully strewn into every pleat of her dress. The golden circlet lay lightly on her brow. In turn she simpered before the sole man at the table—clean-shaven he was, doe-eyed and sabre sensual withal. They said soft things to each other and were almost discreet. The King said nothing as he softly tilted his features back to confront Don Alonso. What the King felt his face dissembled.

“Who is the lady who wears the diamonds,” Don Alonso asked.

“Fickle ambition!” The Conde hit Don Alonso’s head affectionately, enough to hurt. “The Queen, despoiler. No hope for you there.” He sighed, crocodile piteous. “You are in any case preceded.”

“I see.” The Queen’s eye roved, passed by the trio at the ducal table. It stayed to gaze a long second on her puppet husband—the Queen shuddered, shivered. Her escort leaned over her, inquired solicitously—newly warm they mutually twined. The King unseen saw. “Do you think the King knows?”

“Perhaps.” Indifference spoke. “He can do little to her—little with her, either.” The Conde chuckled the time due an old joke. “Their bed was shared one night alone.”

“Then the King knows to pity me.” Don Alonso leaped, a blur onto the table and to the floor beyond. The Conde did not follow. He was a fixed point, fear’s stillness where flight may do no good. He watched what had been hid, sickly watched past where Don Alonso had sat to the King whose lancet glare now pinned him to his seat. The King burned. Marionette limbs moved without strings to the jerking tune of a charcoal melody. A dragon lit the foaming jaw, bonfire exhalation behind barrier teeth. Molten silver trickled from hot eyes in whose pupils the fiery angel’s flaming sword was drawn. The Conde watched the King burn to life, and froze, paralyzed, where he sat.

“Not sleeping.” Lava rage burst from a caldera mouth. “Not sleeping!” The King rose slowly, rose surely, rose and stood with neither aid nor hindrance. He shimmered furnace

gold, a grim remembrance of a king who ruled Spain by wrath and steel. His words were brands. “I pretend. Like you. Like you.” The King took a fragile step towards the Conde, a step to burn air and splinter marble. He tottered—temples fell. Don Alonso started towards him—and fell down, his shins afire, his shins destroyed. He screamed. The duke’s guests, eager spectators once more, cried out too, cold interest a mimic of sympathy. He looked up through tears to see the King still stand, his hand tight on the table’s edge. The King nodded his gratitude to Don Alonso, paid him no more attention. The King burned and could not wait.

The King came closer to the Conde. Somewhere the duke spoke loudly, distractingly, but few listened. His guests, moths at spectacle-light, stared dazzled at flame sharp-whetted on every side. Some brave few edged from their seats to gain a closer view. The King was very close now.

“Conde,”—now the royal harrow spoke. His voice was keen: thin as the wind, loud as a trumpet. “Conde. Give knife.” The malformed hand reached out, hung expectant by the Conde’s scabbard. The Conde whimpered. “Now.”

The Conde blinked. He fumbled at his waist, fingers numb. “Your Majesty.” He found the hilt, brought it to his King’s hand. “Your Majesty.” The hand clenched close clumsily. A butcher’s hand.

“Yes.” The King smiled, mouth wet, eyes coals. He trembled suddenly, a great spasm that shook him head to toe. A leaf in a storm. The knife shook—stilled, as the land after an earthquake. Touched the Conde’s neck. “Beg mercy.” Ash rage, hearth sorrow. “Beg, Conde.”

Two spots pinked the Conde’s cheeks. “Your Majesty, I am a man of honor. I do not beg.” Then he smiled, all insolence and indifference, all joy. “And as one have lived my life.” His serpentine grin bloomed. “It will be a mercy to die one.”

“Liar!” The King hissed, foamed. Blood boiled. The knife went slowly forward, pushed with the utmost of royal strength. “Stupid liar.” The Conde died with no more than a sigh, a

smile on his face. Red spots shone past death in whitening, bloodless cheeks.

The King left the Conde's knife in the corpse's throat. He turned to the waiting faces. His hands were stained with blood. "Revenge." The King was hoarse. His veins pulsed brilliant blue. A pretty man moaned, ran stumbling from the company of the Queen. "For me. For Ines." Don Alonso savored success; felt impatience slake, calm spread. "For love." The Queen's eyes rolled up. She fell to the ground in a tinkle of gems. The King's eyes filled with sorrow, filled with love, filled with every gentle emotion but pity. He shook his head—caught sight and nose of a stinking, sweating man. "Duke,"—he drooled helplessly, terribly spat out the appellation. The duke babbled wheedlingly, was ignored. The King paused to gather his energy, to wipe his own mouth dry.

The King spoke shakily, confidently. "Doña Ines,"—Don Alonso smiled for success at hand. "Doña Ines,"—the King blanched. His hand clutched at a napkin, a fork, a spread of tablecloth. He said nothing for long seconds. A cold ball clutched in Don Alonso's stomach. "She. Be." The guests began to whisper, His Majesty's subjects expressed their concern. The King gasped, turned white and red in quick succession. His legs wobbled—he fell to his knees. "No!" The King and Don Alonso whispered together, one word upon two breaths. The King's hands shook. He sought out Don Alonso's gaze. "Wait," said the King to Don Alonso. He nodded his head minutely, nodded his head and trusted obedience to overleap despair. "Wait," whispered the King, and fainted.

Don Alonso cried helpless tears as physicians and courtiers crowded round the King, obscuring him behind their vulpine solicitudes. He cried and cursed and did not stop even when Rafael tossed Don Alonso over his shoulder and carried him out of the banqueting hall and down to the stables. "There is no God," he sobbed. "God would not torment him so. God would not torment us so. We are in the Devil's hands or no one's. Devils and dead men rule the land." The words tumbled out uncontrollably.

Rafael put Don Alonso on the first horse he found, strapped his master's feet to the stirrups and could not close his ears to Don Alonso's shrieks of pain. "What of the King?" he asked. He had no heart to reprimand the young man's blasphemy.

"There is no hope there." Don Alonso clutched at his horse's mane. It neighed; he groaned. "Nothing but a broken thing." He scuffed at his tears, raged to dry them. "There nothing waits."

"What then?" asked Rafael. "What will you do?" He dreaded an answer.

"Ride." Bleak, bitter. "I shall be in Segovia by dawn and keep my word or I shall be dead. Dead and damned with my sins unforgiven. For all that matters." Don Alonso laughed, humorlessly. "Honor exists, whatever else there is—that I have seen. I shall live by honor or die with it." He saw for a bright second the dawn rise in the Guadarramas, felt his knife slip self-thrust into his heart. "I shall ride and stay for no obstacle but death. I defy the world to stop me." He yelled it again at the empty sky. "I defy the dead world! I defy the devil who rules us all to turn me from my road. I defy God who does not exist to keep me from my Ines." He grinned of a sudden and weakly clapped Rafael on the back. "God or Don Rodrigo. I think this is our last night together, Rafael." He clapped Rafael a second time.

Rafael avoided the third gesture of camaraderie. "I think not, Don Alonso." He looked at Don Alonso's hurt face a last time, to remember it. "I cannot ride with you." He looked away.

"To hell with you then!" Don Alonso brought up the reins. His new steed stamped and neighed. "To the devil with you." He galloped off—looked backwards once, but never twice. He was invisible in the dusk.

"And goodbye to you, Don Alonso," said Rafael with a sigh. "God be with you and God be merciful." The wind whipped up and brought tears to his eyes.

*Don Alonso sped alone through the night. Behind him black mountains bit high to swallow the twinkling stars. Upon his left and right the wind whispered treacherous lullabies through starlit wheat white as bones. A lamb in nightmare bled terror on an unseen high meadow, was soothed by a mother's soft, deceiving baas. Hoofbeats clopped on stone and rutted dirt below. Don Alonso saw Segovia's torches in splintered horseback dreams, beckoning lights that smiled arrival and longed-for ending. His horse tripped. Vision dowsed light in waking darkness, darkness without end. The road spun on ahead—eel thread wound round Spain's sunless maze. Lightning flashed to light lowering, fast-approaching clouds. Dry heat followed to warm the night. Acrid, gunpowder smells blew down from the sky, banished rain's fresh odor and earth's sweet scent. Thunder boomed, the hollow sound of closing doors. The wind pushed against Don Alonso, drove dust past his lips to grit still more his thirst-swelled tongue. He spat, laughed into the wind, and spurred his horse. He could not hear his laughter; the thieving wind had kept it for a trophy.*

*Lightning licked a far arroyo. Grass smoldered; bushes blazed. Deadwood fell flaming from a cliff's edge and broke on the rocks below. The fire ebbed from brittle branches slow as heart's blood. Cloudy red light sputtered up from the tree's pyre, lit the clouds above. Dark scarlet billows now thickly draped the sky. A star ahead persevered through red blanketing to guide Don Alonso's way. The thunder came closer. It fusilladed ahead and behind, the sound of tolling bells and a galloping horse. The bells cried metal's cracking sadness, lamented for the dead. The horse gained on Don Alonso's steed. Soon it paced him—a black steed, a black-caparisoned rider.*

*“A fair night, sir,” said the black rider. His voice bugled plump, cultured accents, bells and the hunting horn. He bowed his head courteously to Don Alonso, did not pass him by. “How goes it with you, sir?” Black hooves hit white sparks on the road.*

*“Are you—a robber?” Don Alonso worked his dry mouth for words. His hand was on his knife.*

*“I? A common robber? No!” The black rider giggled. He coughed—took a flask from his side, drank from it. His eyes caught Don Alonso’s fixed stare. “Some water, sir?” He offered the flask through the clutching wind. Don Alonso hesitated a long second, then grabbed and drank it down. The water was cool, fresh as a forest pool.*

*“Thank you, sir.” He returned the flask. “You have my thanks. I am—”*

*“You are Don Alonso de Olmedo,” said the black rider. He shook the empty flask regretfully. “And a thirsty Don Alonso de Olmedo you are too.” He tossed the flask into the air behind him, drew another flask from his side. “More water, Don Alonso?”*

*“You are kind, sir.” Don Alonso took again, quickly drank. His hand trembled as he gave back the second flask, but it was only water again. “You have the advantage of me, sir.”*

*“Yes,” said the black rider, and giggled. Don Alonso crouched down, kicked hard his horse’s flanks, squeezed knees and yelled encouragement and pain. He galloped forward towards lightning and thunder, galloped till his horse could gallop no more. He looked up from his horse’s mane. The black rider trotted beside him.*

*“I go to Segovia,” said Don Alonso after a time. “Are you going with me, sir?”*

*“I am going towards Segovia,” said the black rider. “Somewhere near the walls we are to fight. Then I am to go elsewhere.” He patted his own sword, an ebon blade a man’s height long. “For our duel, Don Alonso, I choose swords. The choice is mine,” he added smoothly. “I represent the challenged party.”*

*“Oh,” said Don Alonso, realizing, a wracking sigh. Youth and breath jointly left him for the gaily shrieking winds. He shrank down into his saddle, gripped it fast and felt the lines etch along his hands. His feet throbbed gentle reminders.*

*“Swords on horseback. Standing I cannot satisfy your master’s honor.”*

*“Not my master,” said the black rider, asperous. Black eyes flashed lightning’s reflection. “My liege. I am his huntsman.”*

*“Your liege,” Don Alonso softly said. “I am sorry I mistook you,” he said then, and was.*

*“A mistake made in good faith,” the black rider said, smiling. Don Alonso wept silent tears. “We shall start our duel on horseback. I reserve the right to end it on my feet. If you should fall.” He grinned expectation. “Are we agreed, Don Alonso?”*

*“We are agreed,” said Don Alonso, and said nothing more for a long while. The land fell unseen behind their partnered canter. Lightning struck from time to jagged time, lit new fires. The clouds as smoky rubies shone, reflected back an earthly light. The black rider, Don Alonso saw, was masked. The thunder was upon them now, sky-treading hoofbeats that cantered out a requiem of bells.*

Don Alonso hummed accompaniment, memory’s chords tapped for fair harmony. “What bells are those?” he curiously asked at last between the dinning peals. His fingers waved the beat in the air. “I think I know them. I almost know their sound.” He frowned. The black rider said nothing, only smiled. Don Alonso’s eyes widened. Sound became sight, music vision—vision realization. “Olmedo’s bells. They rang for my father so. They rang so.” He listened intently now, swayed sadly in his saddle. “It was this melody. Listen, sir. Now they put him in his grave-clothes. Now they placed him in his coffin. The choir! Do you hear them, sir?” The black rider smiled again, nodded. “They sing around the bells, descant. We lifted up his tomb when we heard their voices. The women wailed now. They knew the earth was waiting. We carried him slowly. The bells rang, the boys sang, the women wailed, and he was dead.” Don Alonso opened eyes he had not known that he had closed, looked at the black rider from an open grave. “He still lived when the bells first rang. He tried to leave his bed. He tried to flee the sound, tried to move. To live.”

*Hopeless, hot anger coiled up in Don Alonso, exiled sad tears. “The priest would not let him. The priest held him still till extreme unction had been said. Then my father was dead.” Don Alonso hissed hatred at the implacable knells. “Vulture sounds.” He turned suddenly to the black rider. “They are the bells of Olmedo. Sir, whose bells are these? Do I know who dies?”*

*“You do,” replied the black rider sweetly. “They are yours.” The black rider marked how Don Alonso thoughtlessly crossed himself, how he paled to pink in the ruby light. The black rider would have felt pity, if pity were in his nature. He smiled ferociously. “Your burial is honorable, if you die. Do you wish to see it?” He asked solicitously curious.*

*“No!” Don Alonso screamed, in terror, blind crawling terror. “No,” he shuddered, hunched in further—noticed a word. A rope in the abyss. “If?”*

*“Did I say ‘if?’” asked the black rider, pretending vexation. “How indiscreet of me.” He smiled no more, bugled no more. He spoke ticking clocks. “Beg for mercy, Don Alonso,” said the black rider. Lightly. Mockingly. “Beg. Mercy waits till the end. Beg.”*

*“And then shall I be saved?” Don Alonso strove to equal mock, could not.*

*“I once rode,” said the black rider thoughtfully, “with the King. Many years ago.” The bells clanged the final notes of grief; began to recede, to muffle in the night. The black rider seemed a farmer recalling chickens killed in last year’s storm. “He was a foolish man, that King. Quick to spend money. Quick to spend men.” The black rider sighed, grinned once more. “Slow to know me.” He whistled a snatch of a hunting song, broke off before its bloody end. “He begged for mercy from my liege, before the end. He was saved, that King. But by then he was a broken man.” The black rider contemplated the fiery darkness. “My liege called me away that night. Another night the King called me back.” He whistled the last bars of the hunting song, a jaunty tune. “I answered his call and,—the black rider waved his hand to encompass the horizon and the land, giggled. “And you see what befell.” The lightning*

*flashed in silence. “Beg, Don Alonso. You shall be saved my liege’s displeasure, and another night I think I shall enjoy myself. Beg.”*

*“I, beg?” Don Alonso’s face twisted a parody of humor. “Don Alonso de Olmedo, beg?” Somewhere his voice pleaded for confirmation. “Sir, would you beg?”*

*“You are unshiven, Don Alonso.” Cool denial. The wind howled hungrily. “You would prefer to risk my attentions.”*

*“So I would.” Don Alonso began to cross himself, jammed his hand onto his knife’s hilt. “Would you beg? Would you in honor beg?”*

*“It is no great disgrace to submit to my liege.” The black rider spoke softly, cruelly.*

*“Would you?” asked Don Alonso. He yelled through the greedy, laughing wind.*

*“Of course not,” said the black rider. He laughed contemptuously, a yelping hound. Don Alonso flushed red to match the sky. He urged his mount to greater speed.*

*A light shone in the distance, sunny yellow. “Segovia,” said the black rider. He pointed to the torch that outshone the nearer rubies. He galloped ahead and wheeled to bar the way. “Our appointed hour, Don Alonso. Death and damnation await you. Do you still defy my liege? Do you still doubt him?” The black rider licked his lips. “Do you still challenge?” He drew his ebon sword a man’s height long, held it straight and flat in front of him. His black horse impatiently pawed the ground. The ground trembled.*

*Don Alonso looked to the skies. The last star had fled. The red clouds boiled. Obscene shapes shimmered in their folds. A five-legged goat uprooted tombstones in a graveyard, chewed its way through grass and earth to impale moaning corpses on its horns. A giggling angel flayed a snake that haughtily bit out its own tongue and so screamed in silence. A serene king opened his arms to all the world, staggered, and fell to lie in sprawling, babbling, perpetual convulsions.*

*“I challenge,” said Don Alonso, quickly, rushing to still his fears. The black rider smiled, dipped his sword as to an equal, raised it again. Don Alonso left his knife in his scabbard. “A moment, sir.” The black rider raised an inquisitive eyebrow. His sword remained at the ready. “Sir, I would ask you one question before we fight.”*

*“Proceed.” The black rider’s tone betrayed a slight impatience, but still he smiled.*

*“When the angels fell, where were you?” The wind fell silent, stopped to listen.*

*“I?” The black rider waited a moment to collect his thoughts. “Some of my brethren made a hasty revolt. I would not join them. Instead, I left the field of battle, and I walked to a far garden. There I plucked a petal from a flower and a wing from a moth—crushed the two together in my fingers—and watched their sometime owners die. I filled a pit with sharp stakes, covered it with leaves, and waited for a rabbit to appear. I put lye in a stream and sulfur in a cloud, and stayed to see the grass wither. I played with beasts, and made them monsters who hated their new forms and all creation no less than they hated me. Then, when I was done with that place which was no longer a garden, I went to my liege, my victorious liege, and I said, ‘My Lord, I have made a place to put your rebels. Take, my Lord, what I have made for you.’ My liege said, ‘You have done well, my good and faithful vassal,’ for he was happy in my works. He sent those rebels there, and they are there still. And then I said, ‘My Lord, what shall I do now?’ My liege replied, ‘You shall be the edge on my sword and the sting of my whip; a punishment to evil men and a goad to the righteous. You shall be the inspiration of compassion, the prerequisite for mercy, the arm of punishment and the temptation to despair. You will put the world to a question which only I may answer. You shall be a purifying flame.’ ‘I am greatly pleased, my Lord,’ I said, and I was, and I have joyed in my work from then to now. Those who fell were proud. Pride,” said the black rider, no longer smiling, “was never my besetting sin.” He kicked his black steed. It neighed, began its slow approach. “Draw your blade, Don Alonso,” said the black rider, “or die like a stuck pig.” He kicked again. The*

*black steed galloped. Don Alonso drew his knife, kicked his own horse to motion. The duel began.*

*The world was quiet, but for hoofbeats and the whir of metal in air. The two approached each other speedily, shapes rapidly increasing in size from one moment to the next. The black rider swept his ebon blade a horizontal circle. Don Alonso sliced out and upward with his knife—felt metal chunk on metal, lifted the ebon barrier, rode through and past. The black rider chuckled delightedly. They were apart. Don Alonso reined in his horse, turned it round. The black rider waited for him. Don Alonso looked at his knife. Near the hilt a rotten black wound bit an inch deep.*

*Another mutual gallop. Don Alonso rode straight at the black steed. His horse tried to swerve. He spurred at it savagely, till it whimpered and obeyed. The black steed swerved. Blades swung out in the night. Don Alonso's knife cut air. The ebon blade whicked horseflesh. Don Alonso's horse neighed for pain, stumbled. Don Alonso kicked it desperately. It could not gallop. It tried desperately, cantered for a second, stumbled again, slowed to a walk. It breathed bubbling pain.*

*The black rider came on again. His blade was whirling, a black scythe. He galloped; Don Alonso lamely trotted. The black steed neighed, hoofbeats pounded, Don Alonso threw his knife. It spun through the night to land point-first, hilt-deep in the black rider's chest. The black rider's face wrinkled in annoyance—he did not stop. One-handed he extracted Don Alonso's knife. Black dust trickled from his wound. Metal dropped from Don Alonso's knife like leper's flesh. The black rider was upon him, the scythe cut, Don Alonso's horse had no head. The body jerked. Don Alonso leapt as best he could from the falling body, landed hard on rough stone and sharp grass. The horse crashed inches from his outstretched legs.*

*Don Alonso crawled. The darkness was close on him, he could not see. Still he crawled. A boot stepped onto his back and pinned him still. "You fell," said the black rider, and sliced down with his sword. Don Alonso felt a leg burn cold, and then felt nothing there at all. "Beg."*

“No,” said Don Alonso, groaned Don Alonso. A snake grinned.

“Bravo,” said the black rider, warmly admiring. “You are most impressive. Beg.” An arm disappeared.

“To hell with you.” A coffin gaped. He tried to move and could not.

“And back,” the black rider agreed. He plunged his ebon blade half into Don Alonso’ spine, twisted slowly. “Beg.”

Bells tolled. Don Alonso’s spine writhed serpentine, broke itself by inches against the sharp decay. Skin dried towards leather and hair bleached white; bones stiffened and eyes clouded—all slowly, as slow as clocks and the setting sun. Bells tolled, Don Alonso could not move, the coffin gaped but came no closer. Bells tolled, the worms feasted with dull mouths. The wind marked time by eons—“For God’s sake!” cried Don Alonso, “kill me now. Do it quickly.” He cried treacle and glue, desperation and agony, aged and knew it before the words could all be said.

“That,” said the black rider, “would be a mercy, Don Alonso, would it not?” He giggled. “A time of reflection is called for, Don Alonso. Slow reflection. That would be just, I think.” He twisted the blade. “A lifetime of contemplation.” He twisted again, and again, slower and harder.

“God have mercy on me,” said Don Alonso feebly, and broke, and cried gulping tears that runneled down his face. “God have mercy.” These words he said slow as eternity itself—they were gone, they were out. He lay like a rag doll. The grave closed, bells faded. Life—a winter sun, a crippled dance—returned. He wept and did not dare to curse himself.

The ebon blade withdrew, twisting as it went. “So he shall.” The black rider laughed mild amusement. “Oh, Don Alonso, if only you had hastened to repent as you had hastened to sin—all this could have been avoided. You will not be so defiant hereafter? You will not be so dubious?” He sheathed his ebon blade. “At least some good has come of all of this.” He sighed regret. “I shall wait for your call. Remember in the days ahead, Don Alonso, how I serve my liege; remember that

*desolation is the servant of salvation. Remember that my master and I shall never part.” He was gone. Don Alonso was gone too, dragged down to a sleep of tears and shame.*

*He woke to feel a shaking of his body. “Don Alonso,” he heard, a familiar voice. The sunlight was orange through his eyelids. Don Alonso felt a hand, five fingers, press into his shoulder. “Wake, Don Alonso. Wake, sir.” He opened his eyes. “You live,” said Don Rodrigo—and Don Alonso screamed. He blubbered, jerked away. Somewhere a snake talked of honor, but that was gone, broken. Only fear remained, fear and desperate life. He scabbled among the rocks, shrank from the looming face.*

*“Wait,” said Don Rodrigo. He came after the broken man—saw him cower, and let contemptuous pity soften his voice. “You have nothing to fear from me, Don Alonso. Nothing.” He reached out an open palm—Don Alonso gibbered. “Nothing,” said Don Rodrigo, and laughed of pure exasperation. His laugh was an echo of giggles and bells, and Don Alonso yelled hoarse terror to the sky. Backwards he lifted himself, a shaky arm and shaky leg to guide him. The other limbs he could not feel. His spine itched fire, wobbled as he retreated. “On your feet, Don Alonso!” ordered Don Rodrigo. “Act the man.” There was hatred in his eyes now, and sorrow. “The King has forbidden vengeance for my father. He sent me to beg forgiveness of you,” said Don Rodrigo, furiously helpless, but Don Alonso would not listen, could not listen. He heard bells. He fled, crawled heedless. “Wait!” cried Don Rodrigo, looked at something behind Don Alonso, ran towards him. “For God’s sake, wait!”—Don Alonso was beyond waiting. He flung himself back from Don Rodrigo, threw himself back into the sky and wind. No ground stopped him. He saw the precipice fall away above him, saw Don Rodrigo clutch uselessly at air on the cliff’s edge. The wind screamed of joy. He did not struggle against the fall—hung limp, like deadwood, till he smashed, smashed upon the rocks below, and broke. Rocks pierced his back—he felt them, every one. He looked up at the empty blue sky, heard giggling. A sword sliced through the air and cut him in two. His spine blazed one final time, and then he felt nothing at all.*

Often the King came to Don Alonso's bed to look with pity on the paralyzed figure. That was a solace, the pity of the king. Others told Don Alonso of how the King now ruled, how the land began to stir once more. It stirred falteringly, as did the King, but it stirred. That too was a solace. When the King was not there Doña Ines would dance for her husband, and he delighted in her quick movements, took comfort from the swell of their child in her womb. He even smiled a few times those first few months after their marriage, before gross pregnancy slowed her down and stillbirth crippled her. Then she was as white-haired as he, and danced no more.

He spent much time in prayer and confession, fearfully assiduous. Rafael was his constant companion at these exercises, and daily carried his thin body in his arms to the church and back again. At mass he bowed his head in faithful submission, and begged like a baby for a bandage to block his ears against the ringing of the giggling bells.

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## The Authors

### **David Bowlin (“Soul Survivors”)**

David Bowlin works as an aircraft hydraulics technician during the day, and spends the rest of his waking hours trying to come up with a safe and profitable way to leave the planet. His stories have appeared in numerous on line magazines, as well as a few print publications. His current writing projects include a fiction novel, and a nonfiction book on the paranormal.

### **Terry Bramlett (“Umando’s Revenge”)**

Terry Bramlett writes SF/F stories in Mississippi, which is almost sacrilegious in the home state of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Willie Morris. He never cared for the Mississippi Big Three, focussing instead on Heinlein, Clark, and Asimov.

Terry has sold stories to *Fables*, *Foxfire*, *Glyph* and *Science Fiction Biweekly Publication*. His second novel, *The Elfland Affair*, will be released in April 2001 by Starlight Writer Publications.

He lives in Ridgeland with his wife Brenda, two dogs, a visiting cat, and two dozen sparrows that become quite antsy when he forgets to fill the bird feeder.

### **Jason Brannon (“The Small Hours”)**

To date Jason’s stories have appeared in *Twilight Showcase*, *The Martian Wave*, *Crimson Magazine*, *Bloody Muse*, *Rosewort Magazine*, *Alternate Realities*, *The Haunted*, *The Fiction Writer*, *Fables*, *Welcome to Nod*, *Dark Matter Chronicles*, *Electric Wine*, *The Edge: Tales of Suspense*, *Parchment Symbols*, and *Gathering Darkness*. He also has stories accepted for upcoming publication in *Darkness Within*, *The Dead Inn*, *Black Petals*, *Alternate Realities*, *Foxfire* and the anthologies *New Traditions in Terror* and *The Witching Hour*. In addition, Jason’s story “Crawlspace,” which appeared

in *Bloody Muse*, was recently selected as one of the magazine's top 3 stories for 1999 by editor Weston Ochse. Silver Lake Publishing will release his short story collection *Puzzles of Flesh* in the Fall of 2000.

### **Alan Bruce (“Not Again”)**

Alan Bruce was born in Winnipeg in 1964. He now lives on a hobby farm outside of Winnipeg. Alan's love for literature was instilled early when he was told that he had to choose from one of Manitoba's five traditional past-times: playing in a band, hockey, television, books, or socials. He pays the bills by working as an Information Systems professional.

He is a writer of speculative fiction. He is a regular contributor to *Jackhammer* and has had works appear in *Infinite Distance*, *Planet Relish*, *GC Magazine*, *Fables*, and *The Wandering Troll*. He also has a story scheduled to be published by *Parsec* magazine.

### **Stephen Crane Davidson (“Keep It for Me”)**

Stephen Crane Davidson's stories have appeared in *Millennium*, *Transversions*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Quantum Muse*, *Fables* and several other small press magazines. He is the editor of the Fantasy section of *The Writers Hood*.

Dancing Willow Publications is publishing his novels *Dream Killer* and *In Death's Shadow*. His first novel, *Far from the Warring Lands*, will be republished by Pulsar Books.

Updates about Stephen's work can be found on his website, [www.condhrui.com](http://www.condhrui.com).

### **Kate Hill (“Moon Warrior”)**

Kate Hill's fiction and poetry have appeared in several small press and online publications such as *genrEZONE*, *Eternity*, *Aphelion*, *Blood Moon*, *Dreams of Decadence*, *The Midnight Gallery*, *Fables* and *The Vampire's Crypt*. Her novel *The Darkness Therein* is available from Dark Star Publications. When she's not working on her own writing, she's reading for the zine *Parchment Symbols* which she

publishes and co-edits. Her homepage is at [pages.hotbot.com/books/khill/index.html](http://pages.hotbot.com/books/khill/index.html).

### **Stuart Jaffe (“Jeo Defined”)**

Stuart Jaffe lives in Lancaster, PA with his wife and two-year-old son. He loves reading, writing, hiking, Tae Kwon Do, and duplicate bridge.

Of the science fiction genre, Stuart writes: “The world continues to change so rapidly that I see great promise for science fiction. More than ever before, the genre has the opportunity to grow beyond gadgets and cool ideas. We can invest a depth of emotion, character, and subtext never before widely accepted in this genre, and we can do so without sacrificing great storytelling. After all, why bother reading something if it is nothing more than popcorn—quickly digested and leaving you hungry in the end?”

### **Shawn James (“Hecharawa”)**

Shawn James has placed stories with the magazines *Voyage*, *Mindmares*, *Fables* and *Darkness Within*, as well as in the anthologies *Tourniquet Heart*, *Extremes 2* and *The Witching Hour*.

### **Lloyd Michael Lohr (“Embers that Remain”)**

Thus far, Lloyd Michael Lohr has published around 450 short stories, articles and poems around the world. His writings have been published in 23 countries and translated into 17 languages, including Welsh, Hebrew, Romanian, Icelandic, Croat, Malay and Tamil. He has also had an extensive amount of work published in both Singapore and South Africa, including a poetry chapbook published by Science Fiction South Africa Press in 1999.

He currently writes a mythology and folklore column, “A Bridge To The Ancients,” for British author Storm Constantine’s magazine *Visionary Tongue*. He is a staff writer for the British music magazine, *Modern Dance*, serves as the poetry editor for the online speculative fiction magazines *Lost Ages Chronicle* and *Fables*, and is the fiction and poetry editor for the speculative fiction e-zine *The Harrow*.

Lloyd Michael Lohr is a contributing author to the paperback archeoastronomy publication “Cascading Comets: Keys To Ancient Mysteries,” released by Stonehenge Viewpoint Press in 1998, and a contributing author to the forthcoming ancient history anthology “Encyclopedia of the Ancient World,” scheduled for release in early 2001 by Salem Press.

He is a member of the National Writers Association, the Academy of American Poets, the Mythopoeic Society and the Dalriada Celtic Heritage Trust in Scotland. He is also a Circle Member of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies.

### **Lawrence D. P. Miller (“Realities”)**

Lawrence works as a programmer for a company in suburban Philadelphia; they wanted to hire him as a designer, too. In 1999, he and his wife Megan incorporated The Meredith Miller Memorial Internet Project, Inc. (M3iP) to do good works on the web.

His fiction has been published by *Fables* and his hard-hitting journalistic efforts (topics include “Beware the PGA Cybermen!”) have appeared on *Circling the Square* under the pseudonym “Taelor Wilhelm.”

### **Nora M. Mulligan (“Passing the Mystical Test”)**

Nora M. Mulligan resides in an unusual little city near the Hudson River in New York, with her husband, daughter, and two cats. She practiced law for 11 years, and has written all her life. Her fiction has appeared in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Fantasy Magazine*, *Lost Worlds*, *Dragonlaugh*, and *Fables*. Her horror novel *Transformations* is available from Sirius Books, and she maintains a homepage at [www.geocities.com/noram10566](http://www.geocities.com/noram10566).

### **Daniel A. Olivas (“Señor Sanchez”)**

Daniel A. Olivas, a native of Los Angeles, earned his BA in English Literature from Stanford University and his law degree from the University of California at Los Angeles. He currently practices law with the California Department of Justice specializing in land use and environmental law. The

author makes his home in the San Fernando Valley with his wife, Sue, and their son, Benjamin.

His short fiction has appeared in various print and web literary journals including *THEMA*, *RiverSedge*, *SouthernCross Review*, *Sparks*, *Octavo*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Writer's Quill*, *The Sidewalk's End*, *Fables* and *salonDAarte*.

His work will also appear in the anthology *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican-American Writers* from Bilingual Review/Press and a children's poetry collection from Lee & Low Books. *The Courtship of Marisa Rivera Peña*, loosely based upon his paternal grandparents' migration from Mexico to California, will be available soon from Silver Lake Publishing.

### **Megan Powell (Introduction, “Princess Tadpole”)**

Megan Powell graduated from Bryn Mawr College, where she majored in History and minored in Growth and Structure of Cities. She currently lives in suburban Philadelphia with her husband Larry and two cats, Groundskeeper Willie and Cynwr. She is the Owner/Publisher of Silver Lake Publishing, the Vice President of M3iP, and the editor of the magazines *Fables* and *Foxfire* and SLP anthology projects.

She has placed fiction in various online and print publications, including *Twilight Times*, *Quantum Muse*, *The Orphic Chronicle*, *The Door to Worlds Imagined*, *The Wandering Troll*, *The Writers Hood*, *Aphelion*, *ShadowKeep*, *Disenchanted*, *Lost Ages Chronicle*, *Dragons & Vampires*, *Blood Roses: A Journal of Dread*, *Whispers from the Shattered Forum*, *Sunjammer* and *Deviant Minds*. She maintains a homepage at [www.m3ip.org/~mhpm](http://www.m3ip.org/~mhpm).

### **David Randall (“The Knight of Olmedo”)**

David Randall is a graduate of Swarthmore College and the Columbia University Writing Program. He currently lives in New York City.

### **Stephen D. Rogers (“Perfect Alibis”)**

Stephen appreciates having had this opportunity to entertain. Next time you're on the Internet, stroll on over to

[www.stephendrogers.com](http://www.stephendrogers.com) for a visit.

**Bill Vernon (“Mama’s Tree”)**

Bill Vernon’s work has appeared in *Brigit’s Temple*, *Blue Review*, *AnotherRealm*, *From Beyond*, *Without a Clue*, *Planet Magazine*, *Fables*, *Phic-Shun* and *Bonetree*.

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